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Vol. L.



OR,

THE VULTURES' SWOOP.

A Story of Astonishing Adventures in
the Buried City of Northern Arizona.

BY WILLIAM G. PATTEN,
AUTHOR OF "OLD DISMAL, THE RANGE TRAMP,"
"HUSTLER HARRY," "CAPTAIN NAME-
LESS," ETC., ETC., ETC.

PROLOGUE.

THE DESERT DOOM.

AN Arizona desert. On every hand stretches a sandy barren, where the only vegetation is the sage bush and prickly cactus. From a sky half-sapphire, half-turquoise blazes the sun, looking like a huge round ball of molten gold. The heat is suffocating even though the day-god is settling toward the western horizon and the day is more than half-spent.

As far toward the south as the eye can reach there seems to be nothing but the same barren desert of sand and cacti; but away to the north, miles upon miles, can be seen the peaks of two

"BY HEAVEN!" GASPED THE ASTONISHED HARRY DENTON, AFTER NEARLY A MINUTE OF BREATHLESS SILENCE, "THAT IS AZTEC JACK OR HIS SPIRIT!"

low mountains which appear to be sunken in the very midst of the desert.

A dead, monotonous, motionless waste. Not a sign of life—Stop! Away toward the mountains a black speck is creeping like a snail across the sand. Slowly it approaches, showing that it is moving toward the south.

A horse and rider in the midst of this desert! Both man and beast seem almost overcome by the terrible heat of the blazing sun. The man's bearded face is so covered with dust that his closest friend could not recognize him. His tongue is swollen till it nearly protrudes from his mouth and his lips are dry and cracked. His restless eyes are red as glowing coals and an insane light seems burning in their depths. Now and then he mutters brokenly, incoherently in a spiritless manner, then he will start as if from a stupor and madly try to urge the horse into a faster pace.

Useless efforts! The animal is, if possible, in a more wretched state than the rider. It is completely covered with a coat of alkali dust and fine sand, and has become injured in some way so that it can only hobble onward with the greatest difficulty. Its dry tongue hangs from its mouth, showing that the poor creature is perishing for water. And all around is nothing but sand, sand, cactus and sage brush.

Across the man's back a rifle is slung and a belt around his waist contains other weapons. Behind him on the back of the horse is a buckskin bag which contains something that gives forth a musical clinking sound that is pleasant to the ear. Often will the man turn and feel behind him to make sure that the bag is there.

"Gold!" he mutters, hoarsely, his voice sounding like the growl of some wild animal—"gold, gold! It is all mine, and I know there is enough more to make a thousand men as rich as Croesus. But, will it ever do me any good? Oh, heaven! must I die here in the desert? I would give half the gold in that bag for a swallow of water! On, Prince, old fellow, on!"

But, the horse heeds not its master's words; it cannot travel faster if it would.

High up in the air a vulture lazily wheels, its eyes fastened on the moving speck far below. Does he know that there is a feast in store for him?

Slowly onward move the horse and rider. An alkali bed is reached from which rises a cloud of dust that nearly overcomes man and beast. It gathers around them in a stifling mass, making it almost impossible for either to breathe.

At length the dreaded bed is passed, but now the horse shows an inclination to stop. It fairly staggers beneath the weight it carries. Observing this, the man drags himself from the saddle, only to sink as soon as his feet touch the ground.

"Heavens!" he groans. "I am weak—so weak! Oh, for a drop of water! I would give half—yes, all the gold I have for one swallow! There is water enough back there, but it is too late to turn back now. I must go on some way—I must!"

He drags himself to his feet and attempts to lead the horse forward, but the exhausted animal refuses to stir. Finally, it moves a short distance, hobbling along painfully, then with a groaning sound that is almost human in its despair, it lays down to die!

In vain the man tries to make the doomed animal rise; it will not stir. Then, with a sudden resolve, he draws a revolver and places it at the head of the poor creature. A muffled report follows and the vulture's feast is prepared.

With a desperate effort the slayer of the horse seizes the buckskin bag and throws it across his shoulder. He staggers forward a short distance, trips and falls.

Once more he rises to his feet, but lets the fatal bag of treasure lay where it fell.

"It has brought me my doom!" he raves, the words sounding harsh and broken. "It has been my curse all my life! How I love it!—how I hate it! Gold, yellow gold!"

"But I must go on. I can carry the treasure no further. I must find water—water! I am dying of thirst—a terrible burning thirst! I would give—Ha! what is that?"

He almost shrieks the last words, for in the distance he seems to see a beautiful lake of water surrounded by tall trees that give a delightful shade. The trees are moved by a strong breeze apparently, for their topmost branches are slightly astir. The sight sends a wild thrill of delicious joy through the lone man's frame. But, an instant he hesitates, then, with a hoarse shout of delight, he starts on a mad run toward the spot where the lake appears to be.

On across the desert sands dashes the deluded man. Sometimes he trips and falls, but in a moment he is up and racing on again. Still he does not seem to get any nearer the lake, for as fast as he runs the water appears to recede. His breath comes in rasping gasps that have a terribly ominous sound. The end is close at hand.

Once more he trips and falls. For several moments he seems stunned, but at length he rises a little and looks toward the spot where he last saw the beautiful lake.

It is gone!

Then he knows he has been deceived by the

delusive mirage of the desert. With a low moan he falls back on the burning sand and is still.

The sun sinks toward the west and the vulture settles slowly to its feast. The long hours wear away, but the human being stretched at full length upon the earth seems as lifeless as the horse that lays with a bulle in its brain.

Down, down settles the vulture, the sun drops behind the horizon line and darkness and death are the twin monarchs of the desert!

CHAPTER I.

BAD NEWS AT THE LONE HACIENDA.

"WHAT do yees make av it, Harry, me b'y?"

"It is a horseman sure enough and he is coming rapidly this way. He is still too far away for me to clearly distinguish his face."

"Let me take the glass, Harry."

The three speakers had checked the splendid horses upon which they were mounted and were surveying the rolling plain to the north of the Little Colorado River. They were upon the highest point of an elevation which gave them an excellent view, and with the aid of a powerful glass Harry Denton had discovered a moving figure far back on the trail they had just passed over. The figure was approaching, and he soon made out that it was a horseman.

Harry Denton was nineteen years old, a straight, manly youth, with an attractive face and a clear eye. The death of his parents had left him penniless when he was sixteen and, following Horace Greeley's advice, he had drifted West. A year spent on a Texas cattle ranch had given him a pretty good idea of the perils of a cowboy's existence, besides making him a tolerable rider and giving him a chance to become fairly deft with rope and rifle.

But, he decided that a cowboy's small remuneration was not sufficient recompense for the perils and privations which he was called on to encounter, and so he struck out for New Mexico to try his fortune in a mining country. There he met Philip Strong, a muscular, well-built young fellow who was a year his senior, and the two became the closest of friends.

But, Harry's restless spirit did not permit him to remain in New Mexico. Believing that there was a much better chance to suddenly acquire a fortune in Arizona, he bid good-by to Phil and turned his face toward the wildest portion of the far Southwest. The Fates, however, had decided that the boys should meet again, and their delight may be imagined when they came together in the little Spanish-American town of San Carlos, on the Gila. With Barney Brady, a lively little Irish lad of uncertain age, Phil had followed his friend into Arizona.

Already had Harry become the possessor of a paper which he hoped would aid him in becoming a rich man, and he did not hesitate in showing the document to the boys and proposing that they become his partners in an enterprise he had planned and have an equal share of the proceeds—if there were any. Phil and Barney entered heartily into the spirit of the venture and pledged themselves to stand by their friend through thick and thin. We find them more than one hundred and thirty miles from San Carlos as the crow flies, having crossed the Salt and Little Colorado Rivers.

"Yes, it is a horseman," agreed Phil, after he had taken a long survey of the oncoming figure, for at that distance horse and rider seemed like one figure. "He seems to be following our trail."

"An Injun, be the howly S'int Patherick!" exclaimed Barney. "It's me skelp, this fates uncommonly loose, an' Oi'm afeared Oi'll be after losin' the loikes av it."

"No, Barney, it is not a red-skin," assured Phil, as he lowered the glass. "It is a white man, but, whether a Greaser or not it is hard to tell at this distance."

"Oi br'athe the siser," declared the Irish lad, "an' Oi kin fale the hairs av me hid gittin' doon off av their hoind legs. It's Injuns that Oi doon't loike at all, at all, unless they're did ones."

"I am afraid your courage is lacking," smiled Phil. "You must be something of a coward, Barney."

"Begobs! it's meself thit'd rayther be a live coward for twenty-four hours thin a did haro fer wan whole year," was the swift retort.

With increasing interest the boys watched the approaching horseman, who was soon near enough so that, with the aid of the glass, Harry made out that he was dressed in the picturesque costume of a Mexican ranchman.

"Be me saull!" cried Barney, when he was allowed to take a peep through the glass; "it's wan av thim haythen Grayzers! Nixt to an Injun he is the wu'st! Ther crayther'll niver dare titch us whilst we kape awake, but Oi'll not dare close me eyes tell he is cl'ane out av this part av the country, fer if Oi sh'ud, Oi'd be sure t' foind meself did entoirely whin Oi opened thim again."

As the horseman came nearer the boys saw that he was a young fellow, scarcely more than a boy. His fanciful attire was in great contrast to the plain cowboy dress of the boys, who wore deerskin leggings and hunting shirts, plain "Stinson" sombreros and stout high boots.

The stranger youth was habited in a manner that would have made him an object of some

curiosity in almost any portion of the United States, although that curiosity would diminish as old Mexico was approached. From head to foot his attire was that of the Mexican ranchero—on his head a black glaze sombrero, encircled by a gold cord—on his feet botas of buff leather with silver spurs at the heels. He wore a navy blue jacket which was fancifully decorated with gold and silver lace; his pantaloons were laced along the seams and left open from the knee down.

This dandyish-appearing youth was mounted on a most magnificent steed, coal-black in color, with arching neck, clear-cut limbs and a splendid tail which swept rearward like a black rainbow. It had an eye that was little short of human in its intelligent gleam, and galloped lightly over the flower-bespangled plain in a manner that seemed to denote a consciousness of physical power and beauty.

The saddle upon the back of the splendid steed was of the true Mexican make, deep, of Moorish shape, the leather being stamped with strange patterns—the best saddle in the world for practical use.

"Howly Vargin!" breathed Barney, a touch of admiration in his tone: "but isn't he a duck, Oi'd loike t' know!"

"Buenos dias, senors," (Good-day, sirs,) saluted the strange youth in a musical voice, holding his horse in check and watching them closely as he came nearer. "You are Americanos it is plain."

"Thit's the first toime this Irish mug was iver taken fer a Yankee's," muttered the irrepressible Barney.

"Yes, sir, we are Americans," replied Harry. "We are bound to the north; you seem to be traveling in the same direction."

"Si, senor. My home lies not many miles to the north, for we are already on my land. If you travel that way and wish to stop, you will be made welcome at the hacienda."

There was a frankness about the youth's face and manner that completely dispelled whatever suspicions the boys may have entertained, and soon they were conversing freely with the stranger. Although dark-complexioned, almost swarthy, he was rather good looking and had an honest, fearless way of gazing straight into the eyes of the person with whom he was speaking—a rare thing with those who have Spanish blood in their veins. He gave his name as Luis Servado.

"We seem to be travelling in the same direction," he observed, speaking excellent English with but a slight accent. "I saw you far ahead and thought you some of the peons from the hacienda, so I hastened to overtake you. It is as well, although I am anxious for news, having been away more than a month. I know that my sister is in good hands, but for some reason I feel strangely uneasy. Let us go on if you do not object to my company."

"Object!" cried Barney, with sudden and surprising politeness; "it's pl'azed we are t' hiv' a young gentleman av your cloth as an addition to the parthy, an' if it is any good vithuls yez hiv at yoor shanthy it's Barney Brady as w'dn't object to a bit av a boite whin we gite there." And the crafty Irish lad winked slyly at Phil.

"You shall have all you desire," smiled Luis. "So come on, senors, and we will chat as we ride."

Side by side they rode away across the plain, the young Spaniard talking freely, seeming pleased to have met those who would become his companions if only for a short distance. It was not long before they espied herds of cattle grazing in the distance.

"They are mine," declared Luis—"mine and Anita's. Anita is my sister. Our father and mother were killed by outlaws and Indians almost a year ago, and since then, mother's brother, Don Manuel Mendoza, has had charge of the place. He is a good man, but he does not take the means that he should to avenge the death of his sister. I have been away from the hacienda hoping to strike the trail of the ones who committed the dastardly murder, but have not been successful. I hope to yet hunt them to their doom!"

The final words were uttered with a fierceness that was quite startling, and the boys saw that a sudden wild light had leaped into the eyes of the Spanish youth. It was plain that he could hate with terrible intensity.

"The slayers of my parents were led by that demonio, Black Vulture," pursued Luis. "The brigands came down upon the hacienda in the early morning. My father hid Anita and myself in a secret nook built in the wall. There was no room for mother. Then, when I tried to get out and make her take my place, he fastened me in. I assure you, senors, I knew not that he was going to do so. I meant to help him defend the place, but he thrust me in with Anita, saying that the bandits would kill us both, and then he fastened us there so that we could not get out. A terrible battle followed, and, defending my mother with his life, father retreated step by step till he was driven to the azotea. He could go no further; there he made a last stand. Some of the peons in the patio below saw him driven to the very edge of the

roof and forced on his knees. A wretch seized him by the throat—a *cuchilla* hung over his heart! My mother uttered a shriek and sprang forward—the *cuchilla* descended and was buried in her breast!"

The narrator paused, a strange choking sound coming from his throat. Then he cried out something in Spanish that the boys could not understand; in another moment he went on with forced calmness:

"My mother's death did not save my father's life. The dastards left them both dead, side by side, on the *azotea*. They plundered the place and searched almost everywhere for Anita and I, but they did not find us. When they were gone, we shouted till the frightened peons came and liberated us. I need not tell of our horror; I have told enough. Don Mendoza came soon after and took charge of the place. He will see that it is carried on; I shall not rest till I know the murderers of my parents are dead.

"But you did not ask for my story; why did I tell it? Your pardon, señors! Spur on, spur on! The hacienda is not far ahead."

He touched the noble black with the spurs and rode on ahead, the boys following closely. Grazing herds were now to be seen all around them, but not yet had they caught sight of a cowboy or peon herder. They seemed the only human beings on the great plain in that vicinity.

It is needless to say that our friends were moved by the young Spaniard's tragic tale, but they spoke no word as they rode on behind the boy who had registered a vow to have revenge on the ruffianly assassins. Even Barney's tongue was silenced.

After an hour's ride they caught a glimpse of the hacienda from the top of a slight rise. Luis drew rein an instant and gazed searchingly toward the old structure, then he shook his head a little as he said:

"I am certain there is something wrong there. I can see no sign of life. Let us hasten on."

Once more they rode forward at a brisk gallop and soon the old structure was continually in sight. It was not long before the boys could tell something of the character of the building. It was built like most of the large country mansions of Mexico, being only a story in height, with a flat roof, or *azotea*, with a parapet all around it. Its four walls were arranged in the form of a quadrangle and were built of "doby" (*adobe*, or sun-dried bricks,) with a *patio*, or open court-yard in the center. From the court-yard, the floor of which was flagged, a stone stairway led to the roof. There was a grand entrance gateway with a heavy wooden door that could be strongly barred.

Of course the boys did not discover all this from a distance, although much of it was to be seen at a glance. Beyond the hacienda they could see a small stream winding ribbon-like through the fertile bottom-lands where the herds were feeding. Outside the walls of the mansion was a small cluster of huts which gave housing to the peons and other dependents of the place, but still there seemed to be no one moving about the mansion or the huts.

In a short time the four boys passed through the open gateway and rode clattering into the court-yard. A pack of dogs came barking toward them, but Luis silenced them with a word. Then leaping from his horse he allowed it to drink a little from the fountain, while he gave a shout that made the court-yard echo.

The shout had the desired effect, for a tall Mexican, wrapped in a crimson *serape*, soon made his appearance and gave utterance to a cry of surprise as he saw the four boys.

"Casper!" cried Luis.

The man uttered several Spanish oaths as he came slowly forward, his eyes fixed venomously on the young ranchero's companions. Luis addressed the fellow in his own language, seeming to ask a question; but Casper hesitated about answering and finally appeared to do so with the greatest reluctance. The reply caused the Spanish youth to grow strangely white and stagger back against his horse, clutching at the saddle-bow for support.

"What is it?" asked Harry—"what is the matter?"

As soon as he could command his voice, Luis replied:

"Anita, my sister, has been captured by Indians! The Don, with a large party, has gone in pursuit. Dear little Anita! I fear I shall never see her again!"

CHAPTER II.

A DASTARDLY ATTACK.

It was bad news, indeed, for Luis Servedo. Anita, while out riding, had been captured by a band of Indians who seemed to suddenly rise out of the very earth. Some of the herders had seen her misfortune, and had ridden as fast as their horses could carry them and delivered the terrible news to Don Mendoza. Casper declared that not a minute had been wasted. As soon as possible, the Don had gathered the herders and started in pursuit of the savages. Casper had accompanied the party as far as the border of the Painted Desert, which Anita's captors had crossed, being headed toward the north. When the desert was reached, the Don had sent Casper

back to look after the hacienda and impart the sad news to Luis, should the lad return.

Like one under a spell, the grief-stricken brother listened to the tall Mexican's story. He did not doubt its truthfulness, and for some reason he did not seem to think it strange that his uncle had taken all the men about the place and left it almost without a single defender. To him it appeared that, in his excitement, upon learning of Anita's capture by the painted wretches of the plains, Don Mendoza had mustered every man possible and rushed away upon the trail, forgetting the forsaken herds, forgetting everything but his purpose to save the imperiled girl.

"I must follow them," Luis said to the boys. "They have carried her away to the north. You are going in that direction. If you are inclined to travel fast enough and wish for my company, I will go with you as far as our paths lie together."

"We shall be glad of your company," asserted Phil, feeling strongly attracted to the frank-faced Spanish youth who was in such deep trouble.

"Thit we will now," nodded Barney Brady, who seemed to have forgotten his dislike for "Graysers." "But, it's the bit av a boite Oi'm hopin' yees will not be afther fergettin' before we start. The whoole insoide av me is holler ez the hid av a dood. We hiv a little stoof along t' be cooked, but warra, warra! it's sorry cookin' it gits."

"You all shall have as much to eat as you desire before we start," declared Luis. "As for me, I want nothing. I will see that Casper has a pack-horse loaded with provisions and extras."

Then he turned and gave a few orders to the overseer, after which he motioned for the boys to follow him, and led the way into the building.

It was not long before the three visitors were seated at a table well loaded with very palatable food, which had been placed there by a remarkably pretty peon girl. Luis did not sit down, but continued to walk the floor with his head bowed as if in deep thought. There was a sorrowful yet determined look on his dark face.

Barney was not long in helping himself to the victuals, and but for the evident distress of the young host, the Irish lad would have made the occasion a merry one with his droll blarney. As it was, he "made eyes" at the peon girl, and rubbed his stomach with silent satisfaction whenever Luis's back was turned.

It had been many days since the boys had partaken of such a meal, and as it was liable to be many more before they saw another, they made the most of it. The girl's eyes grew large as she saw them devour the food.

"Arrah, but it was a jewil av a cook thit prepared thist fodder!" asserted Barney, softly, winking slyly at the girl, who blushed and turned away, unable to understand a word, but feeling certain that the irrepressible "son av the Auld Sod" had made some remark concerning her. "It's like t' sit here an' ate fer a wake I w'd, but it's the insoide av me sthummic thit isn't built large enough."

When the boys had satisfied their appetites, Luis conducted them to the open air where some rude hammocks were swung in the shade and, placing fans in their hands, bade them make themselves comfortable till the time came to start on the journey. Then he left them.

It was comfort, indeed, lying there in the gently swaying hammocks, protected from the blazing sun, and the Irish boy protested that he did not want to ever stir again. They discussed the situation for some time, till at length both Barney and Phil fell asleep and Harry decided that the best thing he could do was to follow their example.

The sun was slowly sinking toward the west when Luis aroused the sleeping boys and informed them that everything was prepared for the start.

"I have decided to start at once," he said. "We shall have to camp on the plain, but I wish to hurry on as fast as possible."

Ten minutes later the four youths rode out through the wide gateway, the scowling Casper watching them off. As Luis had said, they were provided with a well-loaded pack-animal. The boys had greatly needed such an animal when they first started on their long journey, but after procuring their outfits and one complete set of mining implements, they had found themselves in no condition to purchase a horse. This had compelled them to carry their outfits in packs on the horses' backs behind the saddles.

Looking back as they rode away, Barney saw the little peon girl watching them from the *azotea* and waved his hand at her.

His heart gave a great bound of delight as he saw her flutter a snowy-white kerchief in response.

"Hello! what are you at, Barney?" asked Harry, glancing back.

"Only jist wavin' me han' t' the gintlemon we pahst at the gate," fibbed the crafty rascal.

"That's too thin," was the laughing response.

"I see the little maid on the roof. Barney, you are a sly dog."

"It is Pepita," said the Spanish youth, when he had looked back. "She is good and true even if all the others are false."

He spoke in a gloomy manner that attracted the notice of his companions, but they waited for him to explain. He soon did so.

"Pepita found occasion to speak with me when Casper was not at hand. She says that my uncle, the Don, has acted very strangely since I have been absent. With a few exceptions, he has discharged all the people about the place who were in my father's employ and has filled their places with men who look and act like ruffians. An *Americano* has been visiting at the hacienda and has forced his attentions on my sister. She did not like him, but Don Mendoza told her that she must marry him. Pepita even said that Anita was threatened and confined for several days, but I scarcely believe that. If I did—*Santissima!* I will not think it."

For a few moments the young Spaniard was silent; finally he spoke once more:

"I have often thought it strange that when the *ladrones* and Indians attacked the hacienda they obtained an entrance so easily. I now believe there was treachery somewhere and the gate was opened for them by some one within. I will yet sift the whole matter and learn the truth. If my suspicions prove true, some one shall suffer!"

"Can we aid you in any way?" cried the impulsive Phil. "If we can, you may depend on us. We can put off our business for a short time, eh, boys?"

"Roight yees are, Phil, me b'y," agreed Barney.

"You may count on me," asserted Harry, with ready decision.

"I thank you, señors," came with deep feeling from Luis's lips. "The offer is as unexpected as it is generous. Had not my father taught me that the *Americanos* were not always selfish, I could scarce believe I heard right. I am obliged to decline your offer, for I know of no way that you can help me. I must do the work alone, but I wish you to know that I am grateful."

He extended his hand, and one by one they gave it a warm grasp. Someway after that he seemed more like an old friend to them.

Onward they went at a steady gallop, headed straight for the north, where lay the Painted Desert, beyond which, so Casper had said, Anita had been taken by her savage captors. It was early summer, and the fertile plains lying near the Little Colorado were dressed in an attractive garment of green, bespangled, where it had not been trodden by the grazing herds, with wild flowers—the daisy, buttercup and bluebell. Behind them, far beyond the river, lay the purple mountains over which they had slowly toiled. Away to the west more than fifty miles they could see the peaks of the San Francisco Mountains. Ahead there seemed nothing but a broken rolling plain; but they knew that beyond the Painted Desert lay the ancient province of Tusayan, where were to be found the villages of the Moquis Indians, a tribe of cliff-dwellers, and where were also the ruins of their olden towns.

Slowly the blazing sun sunk toward the western horizon, and just as it disappeared from view they reached and crossed a small stream which flowed into the Little Colorado. Then Luis told them that they were close upon the border of the Painted Desert.

"We had better camp here for the night," observed the young Spaniard. "Here we have plenty of water. We shall find no more till we get beyond the desert."

So it was decided to camp close beside the stream that night, and they at once dismounted and began preparations. The saddles and packs were removed from the animals' backs, and after they had been allowed to drink once more from the stream, they were picketed in favorable spots to graze. The boys had no tent, but they were provided with blankets and a tarpaulin for protection in bad weather. The latter they knew they would not need, but the blankets would serve well to protect them from the icy currents of air that often sweep the Arizona plains after the hottest and most suffocating days.

The banks of the little stream, which in the dry seasons sunk and disappeared beneath its sandy bed, were lined with a thick growth of acacias, pecans, post-oaks and elms, which were loaded with a mass of creepers, climbers and clinging vines. The trees crowded down into the water, for in the dry seasons they had to thrust their roots far under the sand to obtain any moisture.

The boys made a hearty supper, despite the heavy meal which they had enjoyed at the hacienda, with the exception of Luis. The Spanish youth ate a little, but Barney declared that it was not enough to "howld the saoul an' body av a muskather together."

The Irish lad was a person who built a fire on any occasion when he could discover a reasonable excuse for doing so, and as darkness settled swiftly over the plain, he gathered an armful of dry branches and soon had a merry blaze.

"The light of that may attract a band of wandering Indians," observed Phil.

"Nary a wan," was Barney's prompt reply. "They hiv all run away with the girruls."

Phil and Harry were forced to laugh at this, for it seemed that the Irish lad thought all the Indians in that section had been concerned in Anita Servedo's capture.

For an hour at least the boys lay on the grass conversing, finding it an agreeable thing to gaze into the dancing flames. Luis said very little, but at length he arose and wandered away into the darkness. He was restless and uneasy, for his thoughts were of his sister, whom he fondly loved.

Luis had not been beyond the circle of firelight five minutes when the boys heard him utter a sudden cry of alarm followed by an appeal for help. Then came the sound of a struggle.

"Mother av Mowses!" gasped Barney. "What's thit?"

Phil did not pause to make any talk. He leaped to his feet at the same moment that Harry arose, but was nearer the point from which came the outcry, and he did not lose a moment.

Bounding forward through the darkness several rods, he saw two dark forms locked in each other's grasp and struggling desperately. With a shout, he sprang straight toward them. As Phil leaped toward the figures, he saw one of them break from the grasp of the other. Then the person who had thus released himself lifted a hand in which something seemed to glitter in the darkness. The hand descended, and the other figure fell heavily to the ground.

With a shout of triumph, the murderous wretch leaped upon the back of a horse that had been standing near and went dashing away into the darkness and was lost to sight!

CHAPTER III.

A STRANGE STORY AND AN APPARITION.

LUIS SERVEDO was the one who had been thus foully stricken down, but, as Phil rushed forward he was delighted to see the Spanish youth rise to his feet.

"Are you hurt?" anxiously asked Phil.

"I think not to speak of," was the calm reply; "but if you had not appeared just as you did, I believe I should have received the fulllength of his *cuchilla*. As it is, I only have a slight cut in the arm. I thank you, *senor*."

"You have nothing to thank me for, little pard. But, who was the dastard who tried to knife you?"

"I believe it was Casper Gomez!"

"What—not the Casper of the hacienda?"

"The same. I saw by the starlight a strange horse standing silently here. When I moved toward it, a man sprang from behind the animal and struck at me with a knife. I avoided the blow and we grappled. Then I called for help. You came soon and saw what followed. He must have thought he had finished me when he rode away, for he gave a shout of triumph, and I am sure that it was the voice of Casper, the *vagüero*."

"Then you were right in suspecting that there was something wrong in your uncle's actions during your absence," said Harry, who had heard Luis's words. "You are being treacherously dealt with."

"That Casper's a snake," hotly declared Phil. "I saw his evil nature in his eyes the first time I looked on them. But, let's go back to the fire and see how badly you are hurt."

When the little fire was reached they found that Barney had quite disappeared; but, a moment later, he crept out of the shadows of the timber, clutching a cocked rifle in his hands, and asking in a hoarse whisper:

"Whur's the Injin?"

"He has fled," answered Phil—"vamosed, pucacheed, skipped."

"Begorra, it's well thit he did. If Barney Brady had put the two eyes av him onther the crayther, there'd bin a wake at his shanthly t'morry noight or nighabouts."

It was found that Luis had been cut very slightly in the fore-arm, and the wound was soon bandaged. It was seen that it would give him very little inconvenience; but, certain it was that the Spanish youth had escaped death narrowly. His assailant certainly had meant to end his life tragically.

For a long time the boys discussed the attack upon Luis, one of them rising every few moments, and going out to see that the horses were safe, and make sure that there was no prowler in the vicinity. At length Harry said:

"Luis, you have been frank with us, and have used us well; now we feel it our duty to be equally frank with you. You must have wondered why we are traveling toward the desert country to the north, yet you have asked no questions."

"And I do not ask you to explain unless you wish to do so," the Spanish youth hastened to say.

"We do feel so," assured Harry. "You seem like one of the party now, and we all wish you were to become one of us; perhaps you may. We are fortune-seekers, and we are bound for

the very heart of the great desert far beyond the Province of Tusayan."

"I see that you have mining-tools, but I have never heard that the region to which you are traveling is productive of gold or silver. Report says that there are great coal beds there."

"But we are not going to mining."

"Then why have you an outfit?" asked the puzzled youth.

"I will have to tell you the whole story to make it clear. It was several months ago that I first saw Aztec Jack in San Carlos. He was a tall, gaunt man, with hollow cheeks and long white hair and beard. His blue eyes had an unsteady, restless motion that told of an unsound mind. No one in San Carlos knew the man's name, but he was called Aztec Jack because at times he raved and muttered of a buried Aztec city where there was an untold treasure of gold. No one took any stock in his talk, for they all believed it was caused by the wild imaginings of a diseased brain.

"This strange man was subject to fits which often caused him to fall to the ground, where he would lay frothing at the mouth and groaning horribly till his eyes became set and his limbs as rigid and motionless as those of a dead man. Indeed, at such times it seemed that he was really dead; but in a few minutes he would come to himself with amazing rapidity and would soon be all right. The people of San Carlos were accustomed to witnessing these spells and would simply say that 'Jack's havin' ernuther' and would let him alone till he came round.

"One day when I wandered some distance out of the town I found the man lying on the ground in one of his fits, being quite unconscious. I at once brought some water and set about restoring him. This was much more difficult than I had expected it would be, and it was nearly an hour before Aztec Jack was himself once more; but he finally came round and seemed as sane as any one for the time being. I explained how I had found him and what I had done, and he seemed very pleased and grateful.

"My boy," he said, soberly, "you shall be rewarded for your act of kindness. I will make you a rich man—rich beyond the wildest dreams. You shall have so much wealth that you cannot get rid of it in a lifetime if you try. You think I am mad, but you are mistaken. You are the first to bother himself about me when I had fallen in a fit; they all let me be to come round alone—or die! In one of these fits I shall die some time, but before that time I hope to see you one of the richest men in all the world."

"I was amazed, for the man spoke like one who was possessed of some education, whereas he usually talked in the rough vernacular of the mountains and mines. He afterward relapsed into his accustomed lingo, but often he would speak his words correctly for several minutes at a time. Of course, at first I put no faith in his declaration that he would make me immensely rich.

"Strangely enough, after that Aztec Jack and I became very good friends—you might say we were pals. I felt strangely attracted to the old man, and as the days passed I grew more and more to believe that he knew of a hidden bonanza and that his buried Aztec city was not all a dream. He would mutter of the city and its lost wealth when he was awake as well as when he slept; but in his dreams, and at no other time, did he mutter of something else—revenge for a terrible wrong! When he was awake he never spoke of such a thing, but his restless eyes would search the face of every man he met, and he always seemed looking for some one.

"One day I brought him out of an unusually severe fit, and he declared that he had been dead and I brought him to life. I knew that it was nothing but the wild fancy of a broken mind, but I did not dare contradict him. He said that some time I would fail to bring him back to life.

"I have intended to go with you to the Mystic Land where lays the Buried City with its golden treasure," he said, "but I fear that I shall never make the journey into the heart of the Black Desert again. I was there once," he went on, with excitement. "I brought away a buckskin bag filled with golden ornaments and dishes of strange design beaten from pure gold and silver! My horse was injured in the desert and the water had all leaked from my canteen. Gods! how the sun poured down! The very air seemed afire! My horse fell dying in the desert; with a bullet I ended its misery. I was forced to abandon the bag of gold. In the distance I saw the mirage of a lake of water, and I ran toward it till I fell in my first terrible fit on the burning sand. The next I knew I was with a band of savages. They were about to torture me, when I had another fit. It must have frightened them away, for when I became conscious I was alone. That is my story and it is true—true as Gospel!"

"Those were his words as near as I can remember them, and they made a deep impression on me. I believed in his Buried City, which he said had been destroyed by a volcanic eruption.

He asserted that it stood in the very heart of the Black Desert beyond the Province of Tusayan. There he said was a strange land—a sort of oasis, fair as the Garden of Eden. There was water in abundance, and from a little lake flowed a stream that soon sunk and disappeared beneath the sand of the desert. There were trees, grass, flowers and birds. In the midst of this lovely spot, between two mountains of a volcanic nature in the past but now extinct, lay the valley where the old Aztec City had once stood—Dead Valley he called the place. The eruption which had destroyed the city and buried it had filled the valley with ashes, lava and huge boulders, making it look drear and desolate.

"In Dead Valley he said he had found a passage that led into the Buried City. The dishes and ornaments of gold and silver he had discovered in a secret vault. He had left behind a hundred times the amount that he had attempted to carry away. I asked why he had never attempted to return, but he answered me in a vague way, saying that he never hoped while he lived to see the place again.

"But," he added, "when I am dead I want you to go there and obtain the wealth which I discovered. I feel that I am soon to die in one of these fits. If I do, you will find within a leather case in an inner pocket of my shirt a paper upon which is written full directions for making the journey beyond the Mogollon Mountains. Upon the paper I have drawn a rude map from memory; it may help you some, but you had better depend mostly on the directions. When I die, I want you to make sure to secure the paper; while I live I will keep it in my possession. As soon as you have the paper I wish you to strike for the Mystic Land in the heart of the desert. Do you promise?"

"I promised. Within a week Jack had another fit from which I was unable to arouse him. More than ever did he seem like a dead man. Finding my efforts at resuscitation useless, I called a doctor. The physician was skilled in his profession, but had allowed liquor to work his ruin. However, he was perfectly sober when he examined Jack, and he pronounced the man dead without a doubt. At first I was inclined to disbelieve it, having seen the strange man in so many similar fits. But when Jack had remained perfectly rigid and lifeless for twenty-four hours I believed that he was indeed dead. Then I secured the paper and ordered a coffin.

"That night I watched beside the corpse alone. It had been placed in the rude coffin and was to be buried in the morning. Of course I became sleepy and would occasionally fall into a drowse. One of my naps was rather longer than the others, and I awoke to find the coffin empty and the corpse gone!

"You may imagine my excitement and consternation. I sprang up and looked around. A window was wide open as I had left it that the room might be as cool as possible. Everything seemed the same, but the body was gone, and to this day I know not what became of it. A rigid search was made, but the mystery of the dead man's disappearance—if he was dead—has never been solved. Aztec Jack had disappeared as completely as if buried in the middle of the ocean.

"After spending some time in a vain search for the vanished man, I resolved to strike out for the Mystic Land and the Buried City. But I would not make the trip alone through an Apache-infested country. Just then my old friend Phil turned up, with Barney here, and I soon had them enlisted in the venture.

"That is the entire story. We are so far on our journey from San Carlos to the heart of the Black Desert."

"A strange story, indeed," commented Luis, drawing a deep breath when Harry had finished. "It is most singular that the body should disappear from the coffin and you should never find it."

"Howly murder! The s'ints presarve us!" shrieked Barney, falling flat upon his back in sudden amazement and terror, while he pointed toward the outer circle of firelight. "Look there!"

Cries of amazement broke from the lips of the boys, for they saw something to give the strongest nerves a start. In the border of the firelight could be seen a strange figure seated on a snow-white horse—the figure of a man with staring, glassy eyes, sunken cheeks and long white hair and beard! The firelight seemed to throw a ghastly gleam over the immobile features of the strange horseman as both steed and rider remained as motionless as if carved from marble!

"By Heaven!" gasped the astonished Harry Denton, after nearly a minute of breathless silence, "that is Aztec Jack or his spirit!"

Then, although the rider made no visible move, the white steed turned and moved silently away into the darkness!

CHAPTER IV.

OUT ON THE PAINTED DESERT.

WITH the silence of a spirit the white steed moved away till it vanished beyond the circle of firelight. For several moments the boys stared toward the spot where the strange horse and rider were last seen, then with a smothered

ered cry Harry Denton leaped forward till he had passed beyond the lighted circle. Phil and Luis followed closely, Barney bringing up the rear.

When they had reached the outer extremity of the firelight they discovered that with the aid of the stars they could see quite a distance out upon the rolling plain.

"There they are!" broke from Phil's lips.

At some distance they discerned the white outlines of the moving horse with the dark figure of a rider on its back. But as they looked both horse and rider seemed to sink into the plain and disappear.

"Oh, musha, musha!" gasped the fear-shaken Irish lad. "Did yees iver say the loikes av thit! It's the Auld B'y intoirely!"

"Where has it gone?" asked the puzzled Phil.

"The horse has simply ridden into a depression in the plain," explained the Spanish youth. "Listen and you will be able to hear its hoof-beats."

They became silent and found that he spoke the truth, for they could distinctly hear the soft thud-thud of a galloping horse on the grass-carpeted plain.

"Not much of a ghost about that, Barney," laughed Phil.

"It's nary a ghost did Oi call it," was the reply. "Oi s'it it wuz the Auld B'y hisself, an' it's stickin' to thit Oi am."

"Ha! Look there!"

With their eyes they followed the direction of Harry's pointing finger, and could plainly see a figure moving swiftly away over the plain. The white horse and its rider had emerged from the depression.

They watched the figures till they faded in the distance, then Luis sunk on one knee and, with his ear close to the ground, declared that he could still hear the hoof-beats of the galloping horse.

"He is going straight out upon the desert," said the young Spaniard, as he arose.

"That was Aztec Jack without a doubt," decided Harry. "He is not dead at all."

"He didn't look much better than a dead man," laughed Phil.

"Betther!" chimed in Barney—"he looked wu't! Oi'd rayther say a dozen did men thin take wan peep at thit crayther."

"Had I not believed him dead I should never started on this journey as I did," said Harry; "but now that I have started, I am not going to turn back."

"That's the talk that pleases me," cried Phil. "I am in for seeing this thing through to the end now. But I reckon we are getting into a country where we had best go a little slow and keep our eyes wide open. That fire is a bad thing and had best be put out before it calls up any more visitors for us. The horses ought to be picketed a little nearer. I will stand guard the first part of the night."

The others agreed that the fire ought to be extinguished, and while Phil and Luis attended to the horses, Harry and Barney looked after the fire and prepared for the night.

Finally, the boys threw themselves on the blankets and lay discussing the situation for some time. They found enough to talk about so they might have remained awake all night, but Luis assured them that they had a hard day before them and they had better get as much sleep as they could. At length, with the exception of Phil, they rolled themselves closely in their blankets and were soon fast asleep.

Phil found it lonely work standing guard, but his life in the wild West had made him accustomed to such a thing. Every twenty or thirty minutes he would "make the rounds," the exercise keeping him from falling asleep. Slowly the first of the night wore away, and he knew that before long the moon would be up, flooding the plain with silver light.

Once or twice Phil fancied he heard softly moving footsteps near at hand; once he was almost certain he saw a skulking shadow close to the acacias, but it vanished in an instant.

"It may be that snake, Casper the *vaquero*," thought the sentinel. "He may have come back to get another back at Luis. Well, if it is he, all I want is the drop. I don't want to take the life of a human being, but I do not think my conscience would trouble me much if I finished him when he was trying to murder Servedo."

But, although he watched very closely, he saw nothing more of the skulking figure.

Returning from a round among the horses, Phil saw a small animal snuffing around the blankets in which the boys were wrapped, appearing to be searching for an opening. Phil stopped and watched the creature curiously, scarcely thinking it could be dangerous, as it was not much larger than a half-grown cat. He was wondering what it was, when, of a sudden, Luis uttered a cry of alarm, rolled over swiftly and leaped to his feet. A moment later a revolver flashed in the young Spaniard's hand, and the sharp report was the death-knell of the little animal, which fell to the ground kicking feebly in its dying agonies. In a moment the boys were all on their feet, Barney gasping "Injins," and Harry asking what the matter was.

"Santa Maria! The poison skunk!" replied Luis.

All of the boys had heard of the terrible poison skunk that is to be found in some parts of the Southwest, although none of them had ever seen one of the dreaded little animals before. The bite of the poison skunk is considered even more surely fatal than that of the centipede. Whenever it finds human beings sleeping on the ground, it proceeds without hesitation to bite and gnaw any part of the sleeper that it can get at, the face, hands or feet being usually attacked. The creature is so ravenous that when once it has had a taste of human flesh and blood it will return to the feast even if driven away; and although the skunk shows no sign of rabies, its bite is almost certain to produce hydrophobia.

None of the boys had been bitten, for which they were truly thankful. The starlight had been sufficient for Luis to determine the nature of the creature which came sniffing close to his face. Had he not awakened thus opportunely, he would surely have been bitten.

The moon was slowly creeping into view when the boys settled themselves to sleep once more, Luis having taken Phil's place as guard. Later in the night Luis was relieved, and everything passed quietly till morning.

The boys were astir at an early hour, making preparations for the day's journey. Luis told them that after they left the stream beside which they had spent the night they would not come to any water for at least twelve hours, and so they filled every canteen and gave the horses all they wished to drink. They ate a hearty breakfast themselves and were soon in the saddle. An hour later they were out upon the Painted Desert.

The Painted Desert is so called on account of the variegated color of its rocks, for it almost seems as if some one with paints and brush had been over the section and had stopped to try his art on every stone, large or small. Nearly all the shades of the rainbow are represented by the rocks of the strange desert, proving a source of wonder and amusement to all who cross it.

Beyond the desert the young treasure-seekers could now see the tops of the low mountains where lay the Province of Tusayan and the homes of the Moquis cliff-dwellers. They did not intend to pass through this region, but had planned to skirt it on the East.

"Beyond those mountains," cried Harry, "lies the Black Desert and the Mystic Land with its buried Aztec city and untold treasure. Boys, unless Aztec Jack was deceived himself, we shall be rich men if we live to cross the Painted Desert again."

"Unless some one has been there ahead of us," smiled Phil.

"If they have, it is unlikely that they discovered the golden treasure. It was by the barest chance that Jack discovered it, but he has given full directions in the paper which I have. One might find the Buried City and still be ignorant of the vast wealth which it contains."

"Begorra!" exclaimed the Irish youth; "Oi will hiv enough so thit me fayther can kape twinty pigs an' me mother 'll not be takin' in washin's."

"And you can marry the little peon girl back at the hacienda," laughed Harry.

"Niver!" cried Barney, with a tragic gesture—"niver will Oi marry at all so long as Oi remain single!"

"A very good resolution; but you will not remain single after you are married."

"Arrah, Misther Harry, it's a long hid yees hiv attached to thit neck av yours. I reckon it's yerself as will be afther gittin' married wan av these days if ye don't alwus live an auld bachelor. It's a good wife Oi'm hopin' ye'll git, fer yer' deservin' of wan t' balance yer own nachur."

"I can hardly call that a compliment."

"A compliment is it? Well, yees may call it anything ye pl'aze. A skoonk by any other name would sm—"

"A horseman, senors!"

Looking in the direction which Luis indicated, they could faintly discern a moving speck far away over the desert. None but a practiced eye would have detected it.

"An Injun, be me sowl!" cried Barney.

With no little interest they watched the figure and finally decided it was approaching.

"I can soon tell whether it is a red-skin or not," asserted Harry, as he produced the glass and proceeded to take a survey of the approaching figure.

"It is a white man," he added, after a moment. "I believe he is mounted on a white horse!"

"Can it be our visitor of last night?" asked Phil, eagerly.

For a little time Harry did not reply, then he said, slowly:

"Yes, he is mounted on a white horse, and I believe they are the same man and beast that gave us a visit last night!"

"Howly S'int Patherick!" exclaimed the Irish lad. "The Auld B'y is afther us again!"

"Let me take the glass," requested Phil.

The change was made, but when Phil lifted the glass to his eyes he was amazed to discover that the plain seemed quite deserted.

The strange horse and rider had vanished.

CHAPTER V.

A RACE FOR LIFE.

EXCLAMATIONS of surprise came from the boys as they saw that the strange horse and rider had suddenly disappeared. That portion of the desert was almost perfectly level with no swells to hide a horseman who had ridden into a hollow, which made the vanishing of the white steed and its rider seem all the more unaccountable.

"Where in the name of all that is wonderful have they gone?" cried Harry.

"Vanished into the air," suggested Phil, laughing a little and looking puzzled at the same time.

"Och, hone! it's not a bit more thin Oi expected," declared Barney. "It's very pale Oi'm falin' 'crosst the small av me back. If Oi could find a gopher hole in this vicinity Oi'd crool inther it an' pull ther hole in afther me."

Luis looked a trifle perplexed but said not a word.

"I don't know what to make of it," said Harry. "I was looking straight at them when all of a sudden the horse and rider seemed to drop into the very ground."

"Stharted for doon balow," muttered the Irish lad.

For some time they sat still, watching for the reappearance of the mysterious horseman, but no living figure appeared on the open plain. At length Luis suggested that they move on once more.

"You may go on, boys," said Harry, with sudden determination, "but I am going to solve the mystery of that disappearance. I will join you again; don't wait for me," and before the boys could remonstrate, he touched his horse with the spurs and was away, heading straight toward the point where the white horse and rider were last seen.

"Come bark heur!" shouted the youthful son of Erin. "If it's chasin' the Auld B'y ye go, the furst thing ye'll know ye'll wake up to find yerself did entoirely. Come bark, Oi say!"

But Harry paid no heed to Barney's words, if, indeed, he heard them at all. He was determined, as he had declared, to solve the mystery of the strange vanishing.

"Let him go, senors," said Luis. "We have no need to put the burden of following him on our animals. He will join us further on, but I pity his horse, for it will be in bad shape, as you *Americanos* say, before it reaches water. The day is to be very hot."

"I would like to follow him," declared Phil, casting a glance after the handsome youth who was riding steadily away over the plain, "but I hardly think it best. If possible, he will solve the mystery, and we shall learn the truth from his lips. Harry is a fine fellow."

"Sorrah the day!" moaned Barney—"sorrah the day Oi iver sthorted to cross this haythen country! It's not only Injins there bees, but the S'int's ownly know whut all. Whut misery Oi'd escaped if Oi'd niver been borrun; but Oi ought to be thankful Oi wasn't borrun twins."

"What has got into you, Barney?" demanded Phil, a trifle sharply. "I never knew you to talk in such a way before. You are usually lively as a cricket, and although you pretend to be an awful coward, I am half-inclined to believe you put it all on."

"Thank yees, Phil, me b'y, fer yer good opinion. It's sorrah a bit of flatthery Oi wuz iver known t'spake before, but Oi fale obliged t' return the compliment, even if the Divil gits me fer loying."

There was a sly twinkle in the Irish lad's eye that told of the fun concealed beneath his dismal pretensions, and Phil was more than half right when he said that Barney was not the coward that he seemed determined to make himself out to be. The little Irishman had no scruples about taking to his heels to get out of danger, but when he found it necessary to fight he could show that he was not built of poor material.

As the three rode onward they watched Harry curiously. The distance between them and the determined young treasure-seeker became greater and greater till at length he seemed scarcely larger than the strange horseman had appeared a moment before he vanished from view.

"Harry must be pretty near the spot where we saw that fellow last," observed Phil.

At that moment Barney turned and looked back over the desert, then he cried:

"Now whut the blazes is thim, Oi'd loike t' know?"

Phil and Luis looked back and a low cry of consternation broke from the lips of the latter.

"*Madre de Dios!* They are Apaches!" he exclaimed, his face paling a little.

Far behind across the level plain of painted rocks they could see a score of mounted figures, above whose heads rose long lances which glittered in the sunlight. The figures were coming swiftly toward them!

"There we have your Injins, Barney," observed Phil, grimly. "They are probably looking after your scalp."

"Oh, wurra, wurra! it's bald-bidded Oi wish Oi was!" exclaimed the little Irishman.

"We have no time to lose," declared Luis.

speaking sternly. "They have seen us. We must fly for our lives."

"Faith, Oi'd fly in wan blissid second if Oi only had the wings!"

"But we can easily keep out of their reach," said Phil. "We are all well mounted."

"It will be not so very easy," replied the Spanish youth, shaking his head, soberly. "We are well mounted for a short race, but our horses they are heavy loaded. Apache horses carry nothing but the rider and his weapons and they never seem to be tired. It is a very long distance to the mountains, and I fear our horses will not hold out at swift pace."

Luis set the pace and did not attempt to put his horse to its swiftest speed. The pack-animal kept up without difficulty, for it was really lighter loaded than the other animals.

"I wonder if they have seen Harry," said Phil.

But when they looked for their friend they were surprised to discover that he was nowhere to be seen. Like the strange horseman, he had disappeared.

"He is gone!" exclaimed Luis, in surprise.

"The Auld B'y has got him," decided Barney. "an' Oi'm thinkin' we'd be as well off if he had us. It's Auld Oireland Oi'll niver set eyes on ag'in!"

"They have not seen him," Luis decided, "and he is safe."

"There is some satisfaction in that," laughed Phil, grimly, as he swung round his Winchester and examined it to make sure that it was in perfect working order. "There is nothing like being born lucky, and Harry is one of the lucky boys. If we had him here our party would be one stronger."

Onward across the Painted Desert dashed pursued and pursuers. When the red-skins found that they were discovered they uttered a chorus of wild yells which faintly reached the ears of our youthful friends.

"Yell away," said Phil. "You haven't got our scalps yet, you painted fiends. If we have to fight, you will find us pretty tough customers."

"We are quite sure to have to fight," Luis observed, glancing back at the savage pursuers. "They will run us down before we can get across the desert, and we shall have to use our horses for breastworks."

"Thin whoy don't yees poomp on a littlle fashter?" asked the little Irishman. "The b'astes are not harruf doing their bist."

"It will do no good to put them to a faster pace. For the time we are holding our own with the demonios Apaches, and if we should urge our horses faster we would only gain for a short time. Exhausted our horses would become, then we should be overtaken more quickly. This race is not to the swift but to the sure. The *mustenos* of the red pursuers are sure to hold out on a long race, where our own may fail."

There was a logic in the Spanish lad's words as his companions plainly saw, and they decided to trust the matter of speed entirely to his judgment. He also decided on the course they should pursue, keeping straight on toward the north.

"If we find our horses cannot carry us across the desert ahead of our pursuers," he observed, casting an anxious glance over his shoulder, "we will try our best to reach Pinnacle Rock Fort and stand them off, as you *Americanos* speak it."

"Pinnacle Rock Fort—why, I did not know there was a fort anywhere in the Painted Desert?"

"It is not exactly a fort, though it is so called. Pinnacle Rock is a large stone which stands upright near the heart of the desert, and at its base are a mass of boulders which more than once have served as a fort for parties besieged by Indians. If we can reach the place, we can keep the red-men back till aid comes or our thirst drives us mad!"

"But the red-skins—"

"Will never leave so long as they have hope to get our hair."

"Now this is what Oi calls a vary deloightful prospect!" remarked Barney. "Is it no wather we will hiv whin we are plained inter the Forrut? Begorra! thit makes me think av the toime Pat Casey wuz tillin' av me fayther aboot bein' adrift at say in an open boat an' hivin' nary a drap t' drink. 'Jist think av it,' said Pat, who wuz the wurrust loier thit iver dored a brith, 'Oi hid plinty av bread an' porruk, but not one swally av wather. Oi wuz 'most did fer the want av a drink, but there wuz no wather in the boat, an' niver a bit av land in sight. Now, Misther Brady,' sez he, app'alin' ter me fayther, 'what w'd yees hiv doon had yees bin there?' 'Faith,' said the auld mon, 'if Oi couldn't got any wather, it's whisky Oi w'd hiv taken, Misther Casey.'" And Barney's laugh seemed to indicate that he was not so very frightened.

The red warriors seemed confident of overtaking the fleeing lads, and they uttered demoniacal yells as they urged their tough little ponies forward with the wicked rawhide quirts. They were all fantastically bedaubed with yellow ochre and various colored paints, and were in full war paraphernalia. Woe to the luckless

captive who fell into their hands! He would surely suffer the most fiendish torture that their inhuman brains could devise.

For a long time the Indians did not seem to gain a foot in the race, but they kept up their hateful yelling all the while. Two clouds of dust arose slowly into the hot air from beneath the hoofs of the horses ridden by both parties. On over the spinous mesquite grass—on past the blossoming cacti—on over the many-colored rocks—on fled the three boys, with their terrible pursuers clinging like bloodhounds on the trail.

"It looks as if it would be as I first said," observed the Spanish youth, as he looked back for the twentieth time.

"What?"

"We shall have to use our horses as breast-works."

"But the fort you spoke of?"

"I am afraid we will not be able to reach it ahead of the Apaches. They are going to push us hard. Touch your beasts up a trifle faster, senors."

For an hour the wild race for life continued, and at the end of that time the horses ridden by the boys presented a pitiful appearance. They were covered with dust and flecks of dirty foam, while the staring eyes and heavy breathing of the poor animals told that the pace was proving more than they could stand beneath the blazing sun which beat down upon the desert, and made the air seem like a hot oven.

"A little faster, comrades," spoke Luis, as he sunk the spurs in the bloody flanks of his own gallant black, and darted ahead more swiftly.

"No use," replied Phil, hoarsely; "my horse is doing his best, and cannot go any faster. Even this will kill him if he has to keep it up long."

"An' it's Barney Brady as is in the same koin'd av a fix. Me noble charger is poofin' loike a st'ame injoine now."

Luis turned in the saddle once more and took a long survey of the pursuers. A hard, iron-like look made his features become almost rigid, and a dangerous glitter shone in his dark eyes.

"It is as I feared," he said, in a tone that was quite cool and precise, "they are gaining on us fast. It looks like we must die, but *quien sabe?*" (Who knows?)

CHAPTER VI.

THE MYSTERIOUS NIGHT-RIDER.

HARRY DENTON cast no backward glances toward his friends as he rode away over the plain toward the point where the strange horseman was last seen. He was too eager to solve the mystery of that unexpected disappearance to have many thoughts of anything else, and so he spurred his horse to its best pace and galloped straight on over the sun-scorched desert.

"I believe Aztec Jack is alive and somewhere ahead," muttered the young Easterner. "Without doubt it was he who gave us a call last night, and I know it was the same person I saw out here on the plain. It must be that while I slept the fellow recovered from the fit and left the coffin to wander away in some kind of a crazy spell. I do not wonder that Barney was frightened last night, for the figure we saw certainly looked like that of a corpse, mounted on the white horse as it was."

Onward he rode till he had reached a point that he knew could not be far from the spot where the white horse and its rider had last been seen, then he slackened his pace a little and gazed keenly around. It was well that he did, for of a sudden he came upon a narrow ditch-like break in the plain—an *arroyo*—which was not perceptible beyond a short distance, but which wound away across the desert beyond the reach of the eye.

With a snort of surprise, Harry's horse reared on its haunches on the very verge of the *arroyo*, which at that point was about fifteen feet wide and uncommonly shallow, being not more than six or seven feet in depth. But to the right it rapidly grew deeper, till its bottom was fifteen or twenty feet below the surface of the plain.

"Ah-a!" cried the youth, as he gazed into the gap; "the mysterious disappearance is made very plain. The white horse leaped into the *arroyo* and galloped away to the right, so of course the rider was hidden from our view. If I wish to know whether it was Aztec Jack, I must follow. He cannot be far away."

Harry was a somewhat impulsive youth, and the next moment he had leaped his horse into the fissure and was riding in the direction he believed the strange horseman had taken. Had he looked back before descending into the *arroyo*, he would have seen the red scourges of the plains in pursuit of his friends. As it was, the hoof-beats of his horse drowned the yells of the savages, which he might have faintly heard had he been at a standstill.

Feeling sure that he would soon overtake the strange horseman, whom he believed to be Aztec Jack, he urged his steed onward at a rapid gallop, passing swiftly along the winding ditch. He kept his eyes steadily ahead, half-expecting to see the person for whom he was searching sitting on the white steed waiting for him to come up.

But no such a welcome sight greeted his eyes. Turn after turn fell behind, and still the youthful horseman seemed the only person in the *arroyo*. At length Harry began to doubt that he had chosen the right course. It was possible that the rider of the white steed had turned to the left.

"I believe I can soon discover."

With these muttered words he drew rein and dismounted to examine the ground. He was far from an experienced trapper, but it did not take him long to find the hoofmarks of a horse that had lately passed along the bottom of the great ditch ahead of him. This caused him to utter an exclamation of satisfaction.

"I was right. The white horse and its rider are somewhere ahead."

He sunk upon the ground and held one ear close to the earth, holding his breath as he did so. Faintly, very faintly he seemed to hear the dull, far-away thud of a galloping horse.

"It would be folly to turn back now," he said, as he once more settled himself in the saddle. "The boys will wait for me, and I will join them sometime before night. On, Ned, my boy; we must overtake the white horse and its corpse-like rider."

Once more he went dashing along the *arroyo*, and for an hour he made no halt. But at the end of that time his face wore a look of vexation.

"The white horse is too much for us," he muttered, "or is indeed of an unearthly nature! Bah! Harry Denton, you do not believe in spirits! The solution of it all is that Aztec Jack is much better mounted than I, so the race may as well end now. But how am I to get out of this ditch? I dislike to turn back, and the sides are altogether too high here. It is doubtful if I could get out at the point where I entered, so the only course is to keep on and trust to fortune. There must be a place to get out somewhere."

Onward he went with the sun now hanging almost directly above his head and pouring such a mass of heat down into the great fissure that the air seemed like that of a closed oven. Not a breath of a breeze reached the horse and rider, and the poor animal soon began to show that the heat was telling on it severely.

Another hour passed and still the *arroyo* continued with no break where the plain above could be reached. The horse's head hung low and it plodded along in a lifeless manner, while the rider was dispirited and had the appearance of a limp rag as he sat humped in the saddle. Now and then he would take a swallow of the warm water in the canteen, but there was nothing of the kind for the thirsty horse.

"This is something I did not bargain for," said the youth, grimly, as he again surveyed the precipitous banks on either hand. "It begins to look as if I had made a big fool of myself. The boys will have great sport over this."

Little did he dream of the terrible predicament the boys were in at that moment. Little did he think he might never see his comrades again.

Finally he was compelled to halt and give his horse a rest. The poor beast lay down close under the bank where there was a bit of shade and Harry followed its example. Soon he fell fast asleep.

Nearly two hours later he awoke and sprang at once to his feet.

"Well, what a blockhead I am!" he muttered, as he looked around. "I allowed Ned to lie down with his saddle on and then rolled into the shade and fell asleep myself. I am disgusted, but the heat was enough to make any one sleepy. It is well that the horse did not attempt to take a roll. Had he, the saddle might have sustained some damage."

Once more he mounted and started onward, having first taken several swallows from his canteen. Within twenty minutes he came upon a break in the *arroyo* where a side fissure led to the surface of the plain. He hailed the sight with a cry of delight.

"Now, old horse, we will get out into the world once more. If I had kept on without stopping I might have been with the boys now."

Ten minutes later the horse was galloping easily over the desert, its rider keenly surveying the plain on every hand.

"Hanged if I can see a thing of the boys!" he exclaimed in a vexed tone. "It is scarcely to be wondered at when I come to think of the time I spent in that infernal ditch. Of course they have passed out of sight hours ago. The only thing I can do is keep on toward the north and join them at the extremity of the desert, for they will certainly wait for me there. My little trip in the *arroyo* has carried me miles out of my way, but I reckon I will find them all right at the further side of the desert. All I can do is plod steadily on toward that point."

Slowly the sun slid down the western sky till at length it seemed to rest like a huge ball of golden fire far away on the horizon. Still the low mountains of the Province of Tusayan were many miles away.

The nature of the country had changed somewhat. Gradually the many colored rocks were disappearing and the plain became more broken and rolling. The vegetation was the same—the prickly cacti and the spinous mezquite, proving the utter sterility of the soil. Just as the sun

was disappearing Harry espied a thicket of some kind away in the distance and headed straight toward it.

"If there is only grass and water there!" was his exclamation.

As he approached he came upon the dry bed of a small stream. Following this up he soon found traces of water, and before long he discovered a feeble stream that sunk beneath the sand.

His horse had scented the water some time before, and it had filled the animal with new life. Like a mad creature it dashed forward till the tiny stream was reached. There it would have stopped and made an attempt to obtain some of the moisture, but Harry forced it to go on for some distance till the stream became of greater dimensions. Then he only allowed the thirsty creature to drink a small amount, much to its displeasure.

"You shall have all you want as soon as you are cooled off a bit, old boy," was his assurance. "Here is grass and here is water. You shall eat your fill."

Along the banks of the stream grew a mass of acacias, hackberry trees, stunted elms and pecans. These were loaded with a mass of clinging vines, some of which bore crimson flowers.

Following up the stream Harry soon came to its source, a living spring of water. He was soon on his knees enjoying a long draught from the clear depths. It was not very cool, but it was pure and refreshing.

"We will stop here a while," was the youth's decision. "Now that we have reached water, I find I am hungry as a bear. I never thought of food while on the plain. We can remain here till after moonrise, then plod comfortably on to the mountains."

The horse was delighted when the saddle and trappings were removed and it was picketed where it could feed. It immediately fell to cropping the rich grama grass which grew in the vicinity of the spring.

It was plain that the spring was a favorite drinking-place for many animals, for the grass close around it was trodden and almost quite worn away in places.

From his pack Harry soon brought forth some dried meat and other provisions, then he sat down on the grass to enjoy a "square meal."

When he had eaten enough to satisfy him, he permitted the horse to drink once more and picketed it in another spot. By that time it was quite dark, the shadows having gathered swiftly after the sun disappeared.

Before he lay down to sleep he took a horse-hair rope, or *cabresta*, and laid it in a circle around the spot where he had spread his blanket. Within the magic circle he knew he was safe from the most venomous of serpents, for not one of the species will cross the horse-hair rope.

Soon the tired youth was sleeping soundly.

When he awoke he found that the moon had risen and was shedding a silvery light over the plain. He felt that something had aroused him, but at first he could not determine what it was. Suddenly he started up, plainly hearing the steady hoof-beats of a galloping horse which was approaching.

Grasping his rifle, which had rested close beside him, he leaped to his feet and hastened to put himself in such a position that the thicket did not obstruct his view of the rolling plain. He came near uttering an involuntary cry, for not far away, and coming directly toward him, he saw a milk-white horse, which bore a rider!

Harry's first thought was that the rider of the horse was Aztec Jack, but he instantly saw he was mistaken, and then he did give utterance to an exclamation of amazement.

The white steed was ridden by a girl!

CHAPTER VII.

BESIEGED AT PINNACLE ROCK.

LUIS SERVEDO spoke the truth when he said the pursuing Apaches were gaining. Despite the length of the race, the tough little mustangs which the red-men bestrode showed no signs of diminished speed, while the horses of Phil and Barney were already "well blown." The noble black upon which the Spanish youth was mounted was still capable of greater exertions, and Phil believed the animal could carry its master safely beyond the reach of the red Bedouins.

"You may as well leave us, Luis," he said. "Your horse is a match for those ridden by the red devils, and you can escape. Barney and I will make a stand and fight the fiends as long as we can pull trigger!"

"Be me faith! Oi belave we kin lick the sthooftin' out av the craythers," declared the little Irishman, who seemed to be getting cooler and bolder as the danger increased.

"Por Dios!" exclaimed Luis. "Do you think me a coward, senors? Three can defy the red-men much better than two."

Phil was not a little surprised at this reply, for it was quite unexpected from a Spaniard, as he had believed the entire race deficient in courage. Association with the peons and mongrel Mexicans had filled his head with false ideas.

"But your sister," cried Phil. "You must think of her. We may all be slain—in fact, we are pretty sure to go under if we are overtaken."

A look of pain passed over Luis's face, followed by one of grim determination, as he replied: "If I fall the Saints will care for Anita. It is my duty to remain with you."

"Hurro!" cried Barney. "Thit's the koid av torruk as does me harrut good! Be the Howly Vargin, you're a brick, Lulu, me b'y! It's a very foine toime we will give the rid nayers whin we git at thim."

Luis said not a word, but once more looked back as if to measure the distance between themselves and the Indians, at the same moment removing his rifle from his back. He saw that the Apaches were gaining slowly but surely and there was no possible way to escape being overtaken.

As the Spanish youth looked round, the red pursuers sent a triumphant chorus of yells across the desert of painted rocks. At that Barney turned in the saddle and, waving his rifle in the air, gave a loud shout of defiance.

"It's nary a bit we care fer yer yoops, so kape it oop till yees splhit yer darty throats. Whin we git doon to business we will make it moighty intherestin' fer yees so thit ye won't hiv a grate deal av toime t' exercise yer vocal organs."

"Go on," said Luis, shortly, "I will overtake you."

Then he began holding his horse in so that it gradually fell behind. At this the Apaches sent up a yell of delight, evidently thinking the black was failing and its rider would soon be at their mercy. They were soon to learn their mistake.

Gradually the distance between the boys became greater and that between Luis and the red-skins grew less. The young Spaniard cast several looks over his shoulder and seemed decidedly nervous and excited. Every now and then Phil and Barney turned in the saddle and watched their friend's movements with curiosity and anxiety.

"Whut in the name av all the S'int's is he up t'?" asked the Irish lad, in perplexity.

His question was answered by a sudden move on Luis's part. He swiftly wheeled his horse's head toward the pursuers and his rifle leaped against his shoulder. Then a puff of smoke sprang from the muzzle and a sharp whip-like crack followed.

But, swift as had been the motions of the Spanish youth, he had not been quick enough to catch the savages "napping," for the moment the black horse swung round those of the red pursuers swerved a little to the right and every Indian disappeared from their backs like a flash, clinging like leeches to the sides of the animals opposite the youth with the rifle.

But Luis was not to be entirely baffled, so he took a hasty aim at one of the ponies and pressed the trigger. Down in a heap went the animal, a bullet in its brain. The rider alighted fairly on his feet, and again the deadly rifle of the young Spaniard spoke.

But his aim had been hasty and imperfect, so that with great disappointment he saw the red-skin leap forward and disappear behind another horse, apparently untouched.

Luis waited for nothing more, but turning the noble black, he spoke sharply a word of command and went dashing on after the boys. This move was greeted by a fierce yell from the Indians, as they discovered their mistake in thinking the black horse nearly exhausted.

It did not take the gallant young Spaniard long to rejoin his friends, and as he came up, Barney cried:

"Oh, Lulu, me jewel, how Oi love yees! It's a darlin' broth av a b'y yees are! Oi'm a thinkin' the sandy-complicated gintlemin to the bark of us will be afther thinkin' their poie is too hot for atein'."

"You did that splendidly," assured Phil, as he gazed at Luis with something like affection in his big blue eyes. "It was a genuine surprise for the red fiends. They will hold us in a little greater respect after this."

But it did not seem that there was a chance for the boys to escape, for their horses were surely failing, with the exception of the black. It was plain that they would have to fight their bloodthirsty pursuers, but they had resolved to "die game," knowing that a terrible death by torture would be theirs if they fell into the hands of the inhuman fiends.

Suddenly Luis uttered an exclamation of delight.

"There is Pinnacle Rock!" he cried.

He pointed straight ahead, and the boys plainly saw a bluish point of rock lifting itself several feet above the surrounding plain. The sight filled their breasts with renewed hope.

"We can reach it," assured Luis. "If the horses can be made to lie down they will be safe behind the bowlders at the base, which will serve as a fort. There is a hollow at the top of that point of rocks just large enough to conceal one person, and any one who reaches it can hold twenty at bay. One must get into that hollow."

"You are right," Phil instantly agreed, "and you are the very one. Your horse is fleetier than

ours and will carry you there in time to climb into the hollow in safety. If you wait till we reach the place it will be too late, for the reds will be able to pick you off as you climb toward the hollow."

"That is true. I will do as you say. I can then have a chance to try my rifle on the Apaches as they pursue you into the fort. Then for the present *hasta luego*."

And so, bidding them good-by in his own language, he touched the black with the spurs and forged ahead. By this time the pursuers had discovered that the whites were heading toward the bluish rock, and they greeted Luis's last movement with yells of fury, and lashed their ponies savagely with the quirts, hoping to overtake Phil and Barney before they could reach the point of shelter.

"Shove your horse for all he is worth, Barney!" cried Phil.

"Thit Oi will, Phillup, fer it's me hair thit doesn't nade cuttin' fer awhoile."

Side by side they raced over the plain, the pack horse keeping close behind. Nearer and nearer they drew to the bluish point of rocks, but when they looked back they saw the yelling Indians were surely gaining. It was a mad race for life.

They saw Luis reach the point toward which they were aiming, and in an instant he had leaped from the back of the noble black. With great swiftness he stripped the saddle from the animal's back, and then the boys saw it disappear behind the bowlders at the base of the pinnacle, which told that he had caused it to lie down. Then the Spanish youth went scrambling up the blue rock, which was very difficult to climb, as it was quite smooth and steep. But in a few moments he reached the top and arose to his feet, uttering a shout of encouragement as he waved his sombrero round his head and watched the race. The red-skins answered with shrill yells of fury.

As pursued and pursuers came nearer the Spanish youth dropped on one knee and waited, evidently intending to try a shot at the Indians. The Apaches saw the movement and uttered yells of indignation. They were pressing the boys closely, and one of the foremost fired an ineffective shot. Barney heard the bullet whistle close to his ear and involuntarily ducked his head. Then, finding that the boys would surely reach the protection of the rocks before they could be overtaken, the red demons opened a rapid fire.

The bullets sung spitefully around the two lads, but fortune favored them, for not a bit of lead reached a living target. Then, although the distance was too great for effective work, Luis tried his hand. Phil and Barney saw the spout of smoke leap from the muzzle of the kneeling lad's rifle and heard the bullet whistle over their heads, but they did not venture to look back to see if it was effective.

As they came nearer, the Spanish youth began a rapid fire, which caused the Indians to utter savage cries of baffled fury and check their ponies while the fugitives kept on and reached the shelter of the rocks.

"Be the Howly Vargin!" gasped Barney, when they were ensconced behind the bowlders; "thit wuz about as intherestin' horrus race as Oi ever attindid."

They soon unsaddled their horses and removed the pack from the led animal, after which they forced the exhausted creatures to lie down—no difficult task.

"There," said Phil, with a breath of relief, "now we are ready for business."

"An begobs! Oi am ready for a drink av warther. It's choked Oi nearly am."

Both of the lads took a long pull from the warm liquid which the canteens contained, but not a drop could the poor horses have, although they stood in desperate need of it. Luis hailed them from the top of the rock which lifted itself above their heads and congratulated them upon their success in reaching a place of shelter.

Out upon the plain the Apaches were gathered in a clump, apparently discussing the situation. Now and then one of them would vent his disapprobation or chagrin by a wild yell. They knew that if they approached nearer the mass of bowlders they were sure to become targets for the rifles in the possession of their youthful foes, and already had one of the boys shown them that he knew how to handle such a weapon.

Finally the red Bedouins of the Southwest uttered a series of screeches which seemed to indicate that they had arrived at some important decision, and immediately they started off one at a time and began riding in a wide circle around the hidden youths. Then began an exhibition of horsemanship which would have drawn forth the admiration of a circus audience.

It is impossible to describe all the feats performed by the howling gang. It is conceded that the Apaches are the finest horsemen in the world. They take to a horse "as naturally as a duck takes to water," the male members of the race being able at a remarkable early age to control and train the wildest and most vicious equines. They seem to live on horseback, and are quite out of their element, as it were, when afoot.

The painted imps of the desert spread apart till nearly an equal distance separated one from the other, then they swept round and round the crouching lads, whooping like madmen let loose. Every Indian seemed constantly in motion and constantly changing his position. One would be standing erect on his pony's back with his gleaming lance held above his head; another would be clinging to the side of his animal in such a position that no part of his person showed, save possibly the tip of his moccasin above the creature's back; still another would be reclining at full length upon the back of the galloping horse, seeming to maintain his position as easily as if reclining on solid ground.

Gradually the circle contracted, and at length Luis called to his friends below:

"They are about to charge on us. We must stop them now. Get ready to fire and do your best to hit. I will give the signal."

But it seemed that the red-skins interpreted their design, for of a sudden every one of them disappeared behind their horses. Luis gave utterance to an exclamation of vexation, and again called to his friends below:

"Ready, *quiere!* They come soon! Shoot at horses. Now—fire!"

At the word three rifles cracked, and the Spanish youth gave a shout of satisfaction as he saw two of the savages' ponies fall.

"*Santa Maria!* that was good!" he cried, with an exultant laugh. Both *demonios* are behind their dead horses. We shall not be attacked soon. That teach them lesson."

The unfortunate warriors whose horses had been shot were quickly picked up by their friends, then the Apaches withdrew to a safer distance and held another "pow-wow."

"Hurro!" bellowed Barney, rolling on his back and cracking his heels together with delight. "We are the b'ys! We kin lick the stoofin' out av the whorol 'Patchy nation. Begorra! this is the most foon Oi've hid since Oi attindid me gran'mither's wake. If some wan will pl'aze bang their bat over the son fer a bit while Oi cool off it is obliged Oi will bay."

But there was no one on hand who could accommodate the little Irishman, and so the sun steadily poured its scorching heat down on the unfortunate lads.

For a long time the savages remained huddled together, but at length they separated into three different parties and each party made its way to a certain point determined upon, so that they "surrounded" the boys. Of course it will be understood that the little party of savages did not actually surround Pinnacle Rock Fort, but the three squads settled down beyond rifle-shot at such points as to make it impossible for our friends to escape without being easily overtaken.

"That looks like business," observed Phil, grimly.

"They hiv sot down t' rist," said Barney.

"They have settled down to starve us out!" declared Luis.

CHAPTER VIII.

UNKNOWN RESCUERS—SAD NEWS FOR LUIS.

It was plain that Luis was right; the Apaches had settled down for a regular siege, feeling certain that in the end their white foes would surely fall into their hands. Accustomed as they were to life on the plains beneath the burning Arizona sun, the task would not be so very difficult. A part of their band could guard the unlucky whites while the others sought the nearest water. In this they could take turns, but the boys within Pinnacle Rock Fort would become maddened by thirst when the small supply within the canteens was gone. Meanwhile, what would the horses do without anything to drink?

"It is a mighty bad scrape we are in," said Phil; "but we must make the best of it. Providence may favor us in the end."

"The mon who waits fer Provydince foinds a moighty larrage job on his hands," was Barney's sage observation.

"When we can stand it no longer, we can charge the red imps and die fighting."

"Sure an' there will bay some satisfaction in thit. It's not bist t' let the rid skoonks hiv all the foon, Phillup, me daisy."

Slowly the hours wore away. The intense heat of the sun made it very uncomfortable for both the lads and the poor horses. The animals had struggled to their feet after a time, and the boys allowed them to stand as there was no danger then that they would be struck by flying bullets. They knew full well that the reds would desire the horses for plunder and therefore would not intentionally slay one of them. Their only care was to see that the creatures did not wander from the circle of bowlders.

Late in the afternoon Luis Servedo slid swiftly down the smooth side of Pinnacle Rock and joined his comrades below. The sharp-eyed Indians uttered several yells to let the lads know they had witnessed this feat, but they made no move to attack the little party sheltered behind the stones.

"They are waiting to be joined by another party," explained Luis. "Then they will swoop

down on us again. How do I know? I counted them. One of their number is missing. He has gone to bring their friends."

This intelligence filled the boys with consternation, and Barney was for making a break for liberty at once, but the young Spaniard argued against it. He held that they were on the watch for such a move and it would end in but one way—the boys would be slain or captured. It was not likely that the absent warrior would return with the other party for hours. It was best to keep quiet till night, then make a break in the darkness which would precede the rising of the moon. Although the chances were against them, they might possibly get away and escape in the darkness. Phil agreed with Luis, and so they settled down to await the coming of night.

It was with feelings of restless impatience that the lads watched the sun slowly sinking toward the western horizon. The mountains on the northern border of the desert were now in plain sight, and they felt that if they could once reach them they would manage to give the Apaches the slip in some way.

At length the sun disappeared, leaving a blood-red glow against the western sky. Barney shook his head dismally as he noted this.

"It's a bad soine," he declared. "There will bay gallons av blood spilt before t'morry mornin'. It is me back hair thit fales wake in the knees wance more. The Howly Vargin protect us all!"

Gradually the red glow faded from the west and darkness settled over the plain, hiding the three groups of red warriors from the nervous boys who crouched behind the rocks. As soon as it was so dark that the Indians could not see their moves, Luis told his companions to get the animals ready for the dash for life. This was soon accomplished, but the young Spaniard restrained the others for a time.

"We should not hurry," he said. "The Apaches rarely attack in the dark. They are—Listen!"

The boys did so but could hear no unusual sound.

"Can't you hear?" cried Luis. "It is the tramp of many horses' feet! They are coming this way! *Quien es?*" (Who is it?)

"The red devils' friends are coming!" exclaimed Phil.

"Worra, worra!" moaned Barney. "Our goose is cooked intirely!"

"Let's make a break at once," excitedly urged Phil. "We have no time to lose, for when the rest of the bloody gang come up it will be impossible to get away."

"Not too fast," came coolly from the lips of the cautious young Spaniard. "Wait—wait! If they are friends of the Apaches there will be excitement when they come up. Then will come our time."

It was not hard to understand that this was true, but it was with the greatest difficulty that the boys held themselves in check. They were trembling from head to foot with nervous excitement and Barney asserted that he could feel the sweat freezing across the small of his back. Soon they could hear the distant thud, thud of hoofs.

It was plain that the Apaches heard the sound also, for they uttered several howls of delight, thinking, without doubt, their friends were approaching.

"Mount!"

Luis gave the order in a whisper, and in a moment the boys swung into their saddles. Then they sat quite still, awaiting the next order.

Nearer and nearer came the clattering hoofs, but not a cry was uttered in answer to the yells of the Apaches. Luis listened anxiously, puzzled to understand the situation. If they were friends of the Apaches, why did not the approaching horsemen make reply to their shouts? Evidently the red besiegers began to suspect there was something wrong, for their cries ceased, and, straining his eyes, the Spanish youth fancied the starlight showed him the Indians mounted upon their ponies.

The boys had not long to wait. Soon the night air was rent by a terrible chorus of war-cries—but not the cry of the Apaches! The boys' red foes had been attacked by Indians of another tribe, who were their deadly enemies. The Apaches gave utterance to shouts of dismay and defiance, and instantly dashed away over the desert, thus showing that they were outnumbered by the attacking party.

"*Santa Maria!* what fortune!" exclaimed Luis, in ecstasy. "Keep still; we are saved!"

They remained quietly behind the rocks till the pursued and pursuers swept past, then they rode forth and turned their horses' heads toward the north, where lay the mountains of Tusayan.

"Now we are free," said the Spanish youth, in a low tone. "Fortune has befriended us."

"Be jabez, ye'r roight!" confessed Barney. "But Oi'm thinkin' we could licked the whorol gang av red naygers! if we hid troid very harrud."

Away over the Painted Desert rode the lads who had been so strangely rescued from the red scourges of the plains. Their hearts were bounding with joy, and it was with the greatest difficulty that the little Irishman could refrain from

giving vent to his pent-up emotions in several yells of delight.

"Begorra! it's the little girrul back at the hashtunder Oi may be afther puttin' me peepers on wance more. There waz wan t-time Oi thought Oi'd niver say the little darlint again, but the S'int's preserved us. It's Barney Bra'y thit will hiv' t' hiv' moighty long hair before he will bay willin' fer a 'Patchy Injin t' do his barberin'. Oi hiv' herrud say the craythers cut too terriful snog t' the roots."

On through the night galloped the three lads, noting with great satisfaction that the yells of their late besiegers, and the Indians who attacked them were growing fainter and fainter far away toward the southeast. Finally the cries could be no longer heard.

It was past midnight when the desert was left behind and they reached a broken country with low hills close at hand and the mountains just beyond a little to their left. It was not their intention to pass through the mountainous section, but they would skirt it on the east.

It was not long before the horses scented water and dashed madly forward. Soon a line of timber appeared ahead and a few moments later the horses were eagerly drinking from a small stream into which they plunged their muzzles with keenest delight. The dust-covered lads were not long in following their example.

"Great hivens! doesn't it taste swate!" exclaimed Barney, when he had taken his first draught.

"Look after the horses," cried Luis. "Do not let them drink more just now. They can drink again soon."

The stream was shallow and easily forded. On the northern bank they decided to spend the remainder of the night. Now that they were out of danger, they began to worry about their missing comrade. Phil felt sure that Harry would find them if they remained in that vicinity, but Luis was anxious to hasten on as soon as possible.

During the rest of the night the lads took turns at standing guard, and the only sounds they heard were the lonely hoot of the prairie owl and the distant cry of some prowling animal.

Morning found them refreshed and in excellent spirits. The adventures and dangers of the previous day and night stood for naught now that they were past. Barney seemed gay as a lark and he broke into a snatch of an Irish song that had a merry jingle to it.

The boys were busy preparing for the morning meal, when the Irish lad suddenly uttered a whoop of surprise, and cried:

"Howly S'int Patherick! look there, will yees!"

Into view rode a score of mounted men, all fancifully dressed in Mexican attire, their spurs and trappings jingling merrily. At the head of the party was a tall dark-faced Spaniard whose face was adorned by a heavy, pointed mustache and a long imperial. He was dressed like a *ranchero* and appeared to be the leader of the party.

"It is my uncle, Don Mendoza!" exclaimed Luis.

At sight of the boys the men gave utterance to exclamations of surprise and the Don called out something in Spanish. Luis sprang forward and halted at his uncle's side, speaking swiftly in his own language. The dark-faced man turned his head away as if to conceal from the lad's eyes some powerful emotion and did not speak for several moments, during which Luis clung to his hand. Phil and Barney knew that their friend was asking about his sister.

Finally, Don Mendoza turned with a sad expression toward his nephew and made a short reply. At the words Luis reeled back and would have sunk to the ground had not Phil caught him in his strong arms.

"What is it, Luis, little pard?" softly asked the burly youth.

"*Madre de Dios!* He says my sister is dead!"

CHAPTER IX.

A MIDNIGHT CHASE—FOUND AT LAST.

GREAT was Harry Denton's amazement when he discovered that the rider of the white steed was a girl instead of Aztec Jack, as he had supposed. The moonlight fell full upon her face, and he saw that she was very beautiful, although her features were marked by a look that was little short of absolute terror and despair. She clung tightly to the bridle-rein of the galloping horse, and her golden hair streamed on the wind behind her, being unconfined.

The strange girl did not seem to see the youth, but he shouted to her as she swept past. He saw her cast a startled glance over her shoulder, but she made no effort to check the white steed, which bore her away into the misty moonlight of the desert. He stood watching her for a long time till both horse and rider seemed to gradually fade away in the white moonlight, but he could still hear the far-away beat of the white steed's hoofs.

"Well," said Harry, with a long breath, "thi is most amazing. Who can that strange girl be? I am puzzled and bewildered."

Then, of a sudden, he was struck by a thought.

"Great heavens! I believe that was Luis Servedo's sister! Luis is dark and the strange girl whom I just saw is fair, but that is not proof that they are not brother and sister. It must be that she has escaped from her captors in some way. If I had only sprung out and made an attempt to stop the horse instead of calling to her! She probably thought me one of her foes. But what can I do now?"

He was not long in arriving at a decision. The hoof-beats of the white horse could still be faintly heard, and he exclaimed with sudden determination:

"I will follow and try to overtake her!"

Then he wheeled and dashed back to the spot where he had left his horse. Swiftly he gathered up his blanket and rolled it compactly, the *cabresta* was rapidly coiled, then he seized his saddle and flung it upon the back of his faithful horse, buckling it there in a deft manner.

In less than three minutes he was ready for the undertaking he had decided upon. Then, as he leaped upon the horse's back, he uttered another low cry of surprise, for once more he plainly heard the beat of approaching hoofs.

"Can it be she is coming back? No, the sounds come from the wrong direction. It is some one else—but who? It may be one of her pursuers!"

Nearer and nearer came the unknown, then Harry Denton shrunk back in the saddle as he saw a second white horse appear! The moonlight showed that the rider was Aztec Jack, the strange man for whom the lad was seeking!

For the time Harry seemed incapable of action. His surprise at the second unlooked-for appearance was so great that he forgot to make a move till the white steed carried its rider past the spring. Then he dug the spurs deep into the sides of his horse and shot out upon the plain, uttering a shout as he did so.

The man whom he was pursuing—he had forgotten the strange girl for the time—must have heard his cry, but he did not turn to look back.

"Jack! Jack!" shouted the boy. "Stop—it is I, Harry Denton!"

Still the figure remained rigid in the saddle, without making a move to look back, keeping straight on toward the heart of the desert of painted rocks.

"He does not hear me—or he does not understand," cried Harry, in despair. "I must overtake him."

But he soon found that that was much more easily said than done, for the white steed upon which the mysterious man was mounted seemed utterly tireless. Harry knew that the chase was taking him back into the desert again, but he did not stop to think of that. He was determined if possible to solve the mystery of Aztec Jack's disappearance at San Carlos, and his singular actions since seen on the southern border of the Painted Desert.

But it was not long before Harry saw that the white horse was surely drawing away from its pursuer. In vain the youth urged his own animal, in vain he called to Aztec Jack. Gradually the distance between pursuer and pursued grew greater.

"He will surely get away again!" cried Harry, in vexation. "I cannot understand why he will pay no attention to my calls. I declare I am mad enough to shoot that white horse! Anyway, I would give all I am worth to own him. It is a noble animal, fully the equal of Luis Servedo's, if not better."

Harry was plucky and would not give up the chase for a long time, hoping that some accident might occur which would aid him in overtaking Aztec Jack. But nothing of the kind took place, and with feelings it is impossible to describe he saw the distance between them growing greater. Gradually the white steed and its rider were swallowed up by the pale, mistlike moonlight of the great desert, till at length the youthful pursuer found himself quite alone.

With a feeling of loneliness and dejection Harry turned his horse's head again toward the north. He was all alone in the midst of the plain. He knew not how far the chase had led him from the spring, but he did know that there was not one chance in a hundred of his retracing his course to the spot where he had once settled down for the night.

On every hand was the great plain, its broad expanse half-revealed, half-veiled by the moonlight; all around him was silence and solitude, dreary and oppressive. The full realization of his position fell upon him like a crushing weight. He was separated from his friends and might never see them again. It was impossible to conjecture what fortune held in reserve for him. "If they do not find me at the northern border of this desert they will push on to the Black Desert," he reasoned. "I shall find them there surely."

But for all of his words he did not feel so very confident about it. He realized that northern Arizona comprized a vast territory, much of it unexplored and unknown.

"Fortune seems against me," he once more muttered aloud. "I expect I was foolish to strike out alone after Aztec Jack in the first

place, but I little thought what the venture would lead to, or I would have been more cautious."

For a long time he rode forward with his head bowed, musing half-aloud. Finally he looked around him and noted with some dismay that the moon seemed out of its proper position in the sky. He drew up his horse and took a long survey of his surroundings, and was finally forced to confess that he was uncertain about the proper course to pursue. For some reason he seemed completely turned round.

"I have lost my bearings," he admitted, "and do not know the points of the compass. I shall have to depend on your sagacity, old horse."

He gave the animal free rein and started forward once more, but the horse moved slowly, and seemed inclined to stop. He was forced to urge it on several times.

After a time Harry lost his patience, and cried:

"Well, if you are determined to stop out here in the desert you shall be gratified, but I promise you that you will not have a good long drink of water in the morning, or any grass to eat till we reach some."

He at once dismounted and made preparations to spend the remainder of the night in the desert. Within twenty minutes he was fast asleep, with his rifle close beside him, and his horse picketed near at hand.

The gray light of morning was creeping over the plain, and a rosy tint in the east told that sunrise was near at hand when Harry awoke. He sprang up quickly and looked around, not remembering where he was. But in a moment he recollected the singular adventures he had passed through during the last twenty-four hours, and then he knew where he was. But when he looked for the mountains of Tusayan, he found that they seemed to be exactly in the south instead of the north; another look showed him that the sun appeared to be rising in the west.

"Well, if I am not turned round, then I'll give up!" he laughed. "However, I know that I am turned round, and so I will not travel south thinking I am going north."

At sound of his master's voice the horse uttered a little neigh.

"Ah, Ned, old pony," cried the youth, "I know you would like both water and grass, but you will have to wait till we reach them. I told you that last night."

Harry ate a few mouthfuls and took a drink from his canteen, which he had replenished at the spring. Then he secured the trappings upon the horse's back and sprang into the saddle just as the sun pushed the upper edge of its golden face above the horizon.

Harry had seen many a sunrise on the plains, yet he never wearied with watching the splendid spectacle. The day-god had sent his couriers of purple, crimson and gold, to announce his coming, and when he appeared in all his royal splendor, the sight was magnificent indeed.

Turning his horse's head toward the distant mountains, the lone youth rode away over the desert. Far in advance he saw a buzzard circling above the plain, and wondered what the foul scavenger had seen that attracted its attention. As he approached he saw that the bird still hung over a certain spot, settling low down then rising in spiral circles.

"It has discovered a morning feast," was Harry's decision.

It was evident that the buzzard regarded the approaching horseman with disfavor, and soon the boy discovered that there was, indeed, the body of some kind of a creature stretched on the plain. A nearer approach revealed the startling fact that it was the body of a man laying silently there in the bright morning sunlight!

Yes, a man. Silent he lay there on the desert sand, his arms outstretched and his rigid face turned toward the sky. His head was bare and his long hair and beard very white. He did not seem asleep, for his eyes were partially open, but they were fixed and staring like the eyes of the dead.

Harry Denton drew rein within ten feet of the rigid figure, uttering a cry of amazement and horror as his horse started back with a snort of terror.

He had found Aztec Jack at last, but—had he found a corpse?

CHAPTER X.

"HO FOR THE MYSTIC LAND!"

"GREAT heavens! Aztec Jack!"

The words broke from Harry Denton's lips as he bent forward in the saddle and gazed fixedly at that ghastly face partially concealed by the mass of tangled white hair and beard.

Was the Mad Treasure-Seeker dead?

No! Slowly a look of life crept into those half-open eyes—slowly the rigid features relaxed. Scarcely daring to breathe, seeming like one spellbound, the youth watched Aztec Jack come back—as it seemed—from the land of the dead.

Gradually the eyes opened to their natural extent, the man drew a long fluttering breath,

then lay gazing up at Harry in a blank, unreasoning manner, making no attempt to stir from the spot where the boy had found him.

At length Harry broke the spell, and exclaimed:

"Jack! Jack! I have found you!"

There was no reply. The madman still stared vacantly at the youthful speaker. The buzzard, probably discovering it had lost its feast, uttered a harsh, angry note.

"Don't you know me, Jack?"

Still no reply. It almost seemed that the man had lost the power of speech, but the vacant look in his eyes seemed to indicate his reasoning faculties were also dormant.

Harry sprang from his horse and bent over the strange man, asking:

"What is the matter, Jack?"

"Matter?"

The man's lips moved as he faintly whispered the word, but he did not seem able to say any more, although his lips still kept moving.

"Are you hurt?"

Aztec Jack made a desperate effort and struggled up on one elbow, gazing around in a wondering way as the light of reason gradually crept into his sunken eyes.

"Where—where am I?" he faltered.

"You are on the Painted Desert. I found you here on the sand, and for a moment I thought you dead."

"Painted Desert?" repeated Jack, pressing one hand to his head and glaring around. "The desert! Ha! ha! I died in the desert once—died of thirst! Oh, water, water, water!"

Harry quickly secured his canteen and gave it to the man whom he had so strangely found. Jack seized it with feverish haste and would have drained it to the last drop if Harry had not forcibly wrested it from his hands.

"Not so fast, Jack!" sharply cried the youth. "You act as if you had not tasted water for some time, and it may hurt you if you drink too much now."

The Treasure-Seeker gave up the canteen with reluctance, but the water seemed to give him new life, for he struggled to his feet, crying:

"Where is my horse?"

That was a question Harry could not answer. "I found you here on the sand. Your horse was not to be seen."

Jack turned his sunken eyes on the boy and demanded:

"Who are you?"

Harry was amazed at the question, for it did not seem possible that the man could have forgotten him, but he replied:

"I am Harry Denton—your friend."

"My friend! Ah-a! I have no friends! They have all proved false—false as serpents! Serpents!—yes, for they struck me with their poison fangs when I least expected it. They were treacherous—treacherous as demons!"

His eyes glared wildly and his long bony fingers twitched as if they itched to grasp something and crush the life out of it. He half-crouched, appearing upon the point of launching himself straight at the boy's throat.

But Harry Denton had seen him thus before and was not afraid of him in the least. With a commanding gesture, the youth flung up one hand, speaking sharply, firmly:

"Stop, Jack! You must remember me! Look well at my face, is it not familiar?"

Their eyes met and for at least a minute dead silence fell between them. At the end of that time, Aztec Jack spoke falteringly:

"Your face seems familiar, but I know not where I have seen it before."

"Don't you remember Harry Denton?"

"Harry Denton—Harry Denton!" slowly shaking his head.

"Why, you must remember!" cried the boy, in vexation. "We were pardas at San Carlos. I brought you out of many a fit."

Still Jack shook his head.

"Can it be that you have forgotten in so short a time?" cried Harry, seeing the man was still dazed. "Try to think—try again! Don't you remember how I found you once in a fit and stayed by you till you came round? You said you might have died if I hadn't worked over you to bring you round. Don't you remember how we used to wander down the river and talk together? You said I was all the person in the world you cared for save one you lost years ago and never expected to see again. You trusted me with all your secrets. Can't you remember now?"

"It—it almost seems that I can."

"Of course you do! You know you told me all about the Mystic Land and the Buried City where—"

"Ah, yes! Ther Buried City an' its yaller treasure! To be course I remembers ye, Harry, mer lad. Guv ther ole man yer paw, leetle pard!"

The change was remarkable indeed, but Harry was not surprised, for he was familiar with the Desert Nomad's moods. The man had dropped into the uncouth language of the mountains and mines as he extended his long, bony hand and clasped that of the youth.

"It jest duz me ole peepers good ter git a squint at ye once more, lad," earnestly declared Aztec Jack, as he clung to Harry's fingers.

"Ye're a sight fer sore eyes! Reckon I must 'a' bin on one o' my off spells, eh, boy?"

"I should say so. I found you here on the sand looking for all the world like a corpse. I have been searching for you since you gave me the slip at San Carlos when I had you all ready for burial. Doc Ferguson pronounced you dead as a door-nail and we got you into a coffin, but you wouldn't stay."

"One o' them blessed fits, an' er bad one I reckon. So ye laid me out fer plantin', did ye, Harry, boy? Waal, waal! Narrer squeak thet wuz I figger it. But ye didn't git ther ole man under groun' or he w'udn't be hyer. How in ther name o' ole Bill Williams did I 'scape ther funeral?"

"You left the coffin while I was asleep, I suppose; but that part is what I want you to explain."

"Can't do it, leetle pard, fer I don't know northin' 'bout it myself. Fu'st I knowed I wuz up in this kentry an' I hed ther all-darnedst best leetle hoss as ever boxed ther arid soil o' Arizony. Don't know how I got ther critter; s'pect someun'll be jumpin' me fer er hoss-thief. He wuz white ez a snow-bank an' I called him White Cloud. But whar is ther annymile now, eh?"

"That I do not know. At about midnight you passed me, mounted on a white horse. I attempted to pursue, but your animal was more than a match for mine and I was left. A short time ago I found you lying here on the sand like a dead man."

Jack passed one hand across his forehead and muttered:

"Yes, I remember. I saw a spirit—a vision of the dear dead one. She was mounted on a white horse. I called out her name, but she would not stop. Then I attempted to overtake her, but as well might I have pursued the wind. I pushed White Cloud to the utmost, but what horse of flesh and blood can overtake a spirit steed! She drew away and I lost her as she vanished in the white light of the moon. Then I turned my horse and urged it away, away—I cared not where. I can remember nothing more."

Although the words were not spoken to Harry, the boy eagerly listened to them all.

"It must be that your horse threw you, Jack," he ventured.

"Hardly, lad," was the reply. "Ther critter don't stan' as kin do thet leetle trick. More likely I hed one o' them tarnal spells an' fell off."

This, indeed, seemed a reasonable explanation.

"It's hard luck fer me," Jack continued.

"Dunno w'at I'm goin' ter do without er hoss."

"Where are you going, Jack?"

"Ter ther north, lad, ter ther north. Ther Mystic Lan' an' ther Buried City lays thar."

"I, too, am bound for the Mystic Land. I have the paper which you told me to secure if you died. I did so when I thought you dead."

"Thet wuz right. So you are strikin' out fer ther golden treasure? Good! We kin go on tergether. Thar is ernuff ter meck er hundred men rich."

"But I am not alone, Jack."

The Treasure-Seeker started and glanced swiftly around.

"Not erlone?" he repeated.

"No. I did not start for the Mystic Land alone; two others started with me."

"Whar are they?"

Briefly Harry explained how he came to be separated from his comrades, and Aztec Jack listened with an uneasy look on his pallid face. It was plain he did not like the idea of so many people going to the strange land in the heart of the Black Desert: When the youth had finished, his listener said firmly:

"Harry, lad, while I live thet treasure all herlongs ter me, fer I diskivered it. Now I don't objec' ter you hev'n' all ye wants, but I'll be blowed ef ennybuddy else shell ef I kin help it. Now you'd best go 'long with me an' let t'other fellers go ter grass. Ef they find their way ter Mystic Lan' it can't be helped, but I'll never guide them thar. You kin choose atween them an' me. Remember I wuz ther one as fn'st tole ye o' ther Buried City."

Harry saw he was in a difficult position. He did not feel like deserting his friends, but he had no right to go back on the man who had first told him of the lost treasure. Jack was alone in the desert without a horse. True the mountains were not far away, but he might fall in another fit and perish before he could reach them. He would stand as good a chance of finding Phil and Barney if he remained with Jack as he would if they separated, so he told the strange man that they would go forward together. That pleased the Fortune-Seeker, and he grasped the boy's hand, crying:

"Good enough, Harry, my lad! Then ho fer ther Mystic Lan' an' ther Buried Aztec City with its golden treasure!"

CHAPTER XI.

AZTEC JACK FINDS HIS HORSE.

"An' now, lad," said the old Desert Nomad, "ther next thing's ter try an' fine my hoss. P'raps I kin trail ther critter."

After a few moments of search, he struck the trail, and, bidding Harry follow, struck out a "lope" across the plain, keeping his eyes fastened on the ground.

"Don't you want something to eat, Jack?" asked the boy, as he kept his horse at the strange man's side.

"Thar, thar! reckon I be er dite hongry, leetle pard, though I hadn't notissed it afore. If ye has er bit o' hard-tack or jerked meat handy, I'll git outside o' it wile I'm skinnin' erlong. Won't lose no time."

Harry soon supplied the veteran of the plains, and with some dried beef in one hand and corn bread in the other, Jack still kept on at a steady trot, taking a mouthful from one and then the other.

"Hadn't you better ride for awhile?" questioned the boy. "You must be tired after what you have passed through."

"Tired! Boy, ye don't know ther ole man yit. I'm never tired. I swore y'ars ergo I'd never know rest tell a certain treacherous whelp o' er human critter wuz foun'. I hain't foun' him yit, but I will ef I live!"

There was a deadly earnestness to the man's last words which caused the one who heard them to shudder. Woe to Aztec Jack's hated enemy if the madman ever found him!

But was the old Fortune-Seeker mad? Just then he seemed as sane as any man. It was only at certain times he seemed like one deranged—times when he brooded on wrongs done him in the past.

"Ther critter struck straight fer ther norrud, lad."

"So much the better for us."

"Yes, it takes us in ther deerection we want ter go. I'd find thet hoss though ef I hed ter follow him ter ther South Pole. Thet thar annymile's w'uth ten thousan' dollars ef he's w'uth er cent—you hear me? Dunno how I ever got bolt o' him, but I'll hang for hoss-stealin' afore I'll guv him up!"

"He has probably struck for the nearest water."

"Most problikely. Thar's er stream as runs roun' ther mountings ter ther south thar; we may fine White Cloud nigh it. Thar is plenty o' water an' feed thar, though ther stream gits mighty dry in July afore ther rainy season sets in. Beyond it is ther kentry o' Tusayan with ther blamedest mess o' ole ruins an' sech ye 'most ever saw. Some o' ther ole towns are deserted, but in most places ther Moquis Injuns are stil livin', an' er pritty decent gang they are too. Thar hain't none o' ther dirty tricks an' fiendish cruelty tied up inside o' their skins as prevades ther carcasses o' ther Kermanches an' 'Paches. Dern an' double dern er 'Pachy say I!"

"Shall we go through the mountains ahead in order to reach the Black Desert?"

"We kin, but thar hain't no need o' it. We kin jest keep in ther hills ter ther east an' go roun'."

"This is the course I had decided on."

Steadily for two hours they kept on, only pausing now and then when the trail became a trifle indistinct. In fact, Harry could not see the trail at all, but Jack seemed to have very little trouble in following it.

The desert of painted rocks was left behind and a section of undulating land reached. But still the vegetation was mostly mezquite, cactus and sage-brush. The timber which lined the course of the stream was yet some miles ahead when Aztec Jack halted with a sudden exclamation.

"What is it?" asked Harry.

"Smoke, my lad, smoke!"

"I cannot see any."

"Thet's 'cause yer eyes hain't accustomed ter reach out arter sech signs. Look 'way thar jest over ther timber line thet marks ther creek; can't ye see thet bit o' blue vapor curlin' up'ard?"

Harry gazed sharply in the direction indicated, and after a time he could make out the bluish, vapor-like substance slowly rising above the timber.

"I can see it now," he said; "but I never would have noticed it if you had not pointed it out. What does it mean—that some one is encamped there?"

"Thet's ther way I figger it."

"Red or white?"

"Most problikely red."

"It may be the boys."

"An' it may be er war-party o' 'Paches. We've got ter go kinder slow like."

"What do you think best?"

"Waal, this year trail strikes ther creek a clean two mile above ther place whar thet smoke's risin' an' I propose ter keep rite on. Ef ther ole hoss took er turn torrads ther place whar thet fire is, we'll hev ter leave ther trail, fer it won't do ter git too near er camp o' ther red varmints now. Ef I hed White Cloud I w'udn't keer er dern fer myself."

"But how are we to know if they are reds or whites camped there? I feel some anxiety about my friends."

"Arter we strike ther creek I'll take er sneak down thet thar way an' diskiver w'at for kind o' critters is runnin' er fire so keerless like. Ef

they're reds we'll take keer ter guv 'em a wide berth."

"They may sight us before we reach cover."

"Got ter look out fer thet an' hug ter ther hollers. Better git off yer hoss, lad, so ye won't loom up inter ther air so, an' foller me."

Harry dismounted and once more they moved forward, but this time they traveled very slowly. It was more than an hour before they reached the timber which bordered the stream, and when they were once fairly within its cover Aztec Jack drew a deep breath of relief.

"So fur so good," he said softly. "Now, boy, I'm goin' to strike down-stream an' take a peep at the critters w'at are risin' the smoke. I want you to stay rite hyer an' lay low. I will be back afore shortly."

Harry made no objections, although he would have liked to accompany his companion; but he resolved that if Jack reported he had found the boys, Phil, Barney and Luis, he would not go on to the Mystic Land and desert them; leaving them in ignorance of his fate.

Jack stole cautiously down the stream, leaving his young friend standing beside the horse, which was enjoying a cool drink. The old Treasure-Seeker did not appear armed in any way, but Harry knew that he carried at least one heavy revolver and a long wicked-looking knife. The boy had never known him to possess a rifle.

While Jack was away Harry allowed his horse to feed on the rich grass which grew in small openings near the stream. The man was not long absent, returning within an hour.

"Bah!" he said, with an expression of disgust on his pale face. "A dirty band of Greasers, pritty nigh thirty in all. It's ez villainous gang's ever I sot my ole eyes on, an' I reckon they're cut-throats o' ther wu'st kind."

"Did they have any prisoners?"

"Didn't see enny."

Jack failed to mention that he had seen in the midst of the gang two boys who were neither Mexicans or Spaniards, but who appeared to be at liberty to go or come as they pleased, and Harry began to believe his friends had pushed on without him.

"They will probably wait for me at the border of the next desert," he thought. "I will go that far with Jack, but I shall not go on without them or without some knowledge of their whereabouts."

"We hed best git right out o' this lokality," observed the old man. "Frum ther sign it's plain my hoss crossed ther creek hyer. We'll pick up ther trail on t'other side an' continner right on arter ther critter. He didn't travel fur arter strikin' feed an' water."

They easily crossed the stream, and, as Jack had expected, found where his horse had fed beyond. For some time the animal had wandered here and there, feeding wherever he chose, but at length he had once more struck out for the north. The old man laughed with satisfaction as he noted this.

"Seems like he knew which way ter go," he observed. "Reckon this trail'll take us inter the maountings, but we hain't goin' ter go much out o' our way, ef we do enny a tall."

It was not long before they struck the foothills, which were lightly timbered and presented a great contrast to the arid desert they had lately left. But Jack was surprised to find the trail led them so far from the stream and held such a direct course.

"Seems like ther critter wuz strikin' fer sum-whar he hed in mine," the old man finally observed. "Don't know jest—Ha!"

He stopped suddenly and began to examine the ground closely, growing strangely excited. Harry watched him in silence till he could keep quiet no longer, then asked:

"What is it, Jack—what have you discovered?"

"Trubble," was the short reply. "Double dern ther onery luck!"

"Have you lost the trail?"

"Lost nuthin'!" grunted the excited man. "I've foun' more nor what I wanted ter. White Cloud has bin roped by reds."

This was an unpleasant discovery, indeed, for it would be found no difficult task to recover the animal which had fallen into the hands of Indians.

"Roped by reds!" echoed Harry. "How do you know—how can you tell?"

"It's plain ez er book. Thar wuz three o' 'em. They wuz behind this bresh w'en White Cloud kem erlong hyer. He scented 'em w'en he got thar, or else one o' their hosses whickered, fer he stopped short. Then ther rope drapped over his head. Reckon he's bin thar afore, fer he didn't make much struggle, an' he's so full o' fire he w'ud 'a' raised thunder ef he'd never bin caught in ther noose. They scooped him easy."

"But they may have been whites instead of Indians. How can you tell?"

"Easy ernuff. Thar hain't er shoe on one o' their hosses' feet. Ef they'd bin white, ther critters'd bin pritty shore ter bin shod."

"How many were there?"

"Only three."

"Well, what's to be done now?"

"I'm goin' fer my hoss, an' I'm goin' ter hev it or bu'st!"

Harry knew that nothing would turn the man from his purpose even if he knew he would have to face half a hundred warriors. Once more they went forward on the trail, but now they exercised the greatest caution, for they knew there was danger of running into a deadly ambush.

The trail now branched to the west and led them toward a more mountainous region, but Jack made no halt. The sun was high in the heavens, indicating that it was near midday.

Finally, the tireless trailer began to proceed still more cautiously, the state of the trail telling him they were close upon the Indians. At length he advised Harry to picket his horse and follow afoot.

It was not long after this was done before they came in sight of the three red-skinned, who were resting in the shadow of a little hollow, their own animals and that of Aztec Jack being secured close at hand. The madman's eyes gleamed wickedly as they rested on the three forms wrapped in their greasy red blankets.

"Derned onery Utes!" he hissed. "I'm goin' down thar arter my hoss, boy, an' I want you to draw er clean head on them red imps. Hev yer shooter at full cock, an' ef one o' 'em tries ter wipe me out, sock it ter him! Ef you don't, he'll sock it ter me."

And then, before Harry could remonstrate, Aztec Jack arose and calmly walked down the slope straight toward the three Indians—the act of one whose mind was unbalanced.

CHAPTER XII.

LUIS SPEAKS HIS MIND—FREEDOM OR DEATH!

FOR a few moments Luis Servedo seemed utterly broken down by the news of his sister's death, and he surely would have fallen to the ground had not Phil supported him. The affection of the brother and sister had always been strong, but after the death of their parents they had seemed all the world to each other. But for the fact that her father and mother were still unavenged, Anita would not have consented to a long separation from her brother; but Luis was going on the trail of vengeance—that was enough to silence her expressions of regret. But the Spanish youth could not forget how she had clasped her arms around his neck and clung there as if she would never let him go. Had she kissed him then for the last time? Were her lips cold in death? His heart rebelled against the thought.

With a suddenness that was startling, he wheeled toward Don Mendoza, sharply demanding in Spanish:

"How do you know she is dead? Where is her body?"

For a moment the dark-faced man seemed taken aback, but he quickly recovered and replied:

"We have not the body, but we know she is dead. There can be no doubt of it, Luis. My heart bleeds for you, but you must bear up and trust in the Saints."

Strangely enough, these words seemed to anger the lad, for his face flushed hotly, and his eyes gleamed in a singular manner.

"You say you have not Anita's body," he cried. "Then where is it?"

"Do not ask!"

"But I do ask, and I will know! Don Mendoza, it is but right that I should know all about the fate of Anita."

"My poor boy! I cannot tell you!"

"Cannot? You must—you shall! She was the dearest in life to me. I demand to know her fate!"

Again the Don turned his face away, and seemed greatly agitated for a time. Although he could only understand now and then a word, Phil watched and listened closely, comprehending the whole scene.

Slowly Don Mendoza swung himself out of the saddle and stood before his grief-stricken nephew, a look of compassion in his coal-black eyes. Luis grew impatient at his prolonged silence, and cried, almost fiercely:

"Speak, sir! I am listening!"

A black look flashed across Don Mendoza's face, but he controlled his voice as he said:

"The news of her death nearly overcame you. Will not the facts of how she died quite break you down?"

"No!" gritted the lad. "Nothing will break me down now. I am ready and eager to hear the worst. I shall live only for vengeance! Speak!"

"You know quite well some of the terrible means used by the Apaches in ending the lives of their victims."

"Yes; I know. There are many. How did she die?"

"By fire!"

The words did not have the effect on Luis that Don Mendoza had expected after witnessing his previous emotion. There was simply a slight compression of the lips and a more deadly flash of the midnight eyes, as the boy asked, in a low, icy tone:

"They burned her at the stake?"

"They did."

"Did you see this done?"

"Madre de Dios! No, no!"

"Then how do you know she died thus?"

"Juan and Francis saw it all."

Instantly Luis turned to the men named, who happened to be two of his father's old herders, but were men he had never liked.

"Did you see my sister burned at the stake?" demanded the young Spaniard, his gleaming eyes seeming to pierce the men like fiery darts.

The rascals hesitated an instant but, catching the eye of the dark-faced Don, they replied:

"We did."

A sneering laugh parted Luis Servedo's lips.

"Your faces give you the lie, dogs!" he hissed.

"Carajo!" grated the Don, his face black as a thunder-cloud. "Do you doubt my word—do you dare?"

"Have I said so?"

"You have implied as much."

"I simply expressed a doubt that these men saw Anita burned to death. They may have told you so—and lied!"

Both Juan and Francis growled out low oaths and their hands sought concealed weapons; but the daring youth faced them boldly, speaking with icy coolness:

"Draw a weapon, dogs, if you dare."

He made no move to produce a weapon, but the flash of his piercing eyes cowed the men he addressed. Their hands fell from their sashes and their eyes drooped before his.

"I am your master," added the cool young Spaniard; "a thing you will do well to remember. If I say so, you lose your places and are cast adrift."

"Boy," cried Don Mendoza, "you forget that your father left everything in my charge till you came of age. You are carrying this thing too far. I am master for the present."

"But I trust you would not see those men draw a weapon on me?" came calmly from the youth's lips. "It cannot be that my father was deceived when he put so much trust in you."

The words placed the Don in an unenviable position, and he was forced to rebuke the men for their evident intentions. When he had done so, Luis asked:

"What have you done toward avenging Anita?"

"We could do nothing. The Apaches outnumbered us three to one."

Once more the youth's anger seemed to master him. His lips curled with scorn.

"And are you my mother's brother?" he exclaimed, fearlessly facing the astonished and angry Don. "Can it be that you would let your sister, her husband and her child go unavenged? Oh, man, man! Of what is your heart made?"

The Spanish Don shrunk before this scathing rebuke, and before he could recover, Luis continued:

"I will avenge them! The red demons of the plains who slew my sister shall feel my fury! You may turn your back on them, but I shall not."

For a time Mendoza was too amazed to reply, but finally he broke into a sneering laugh.

"You talk very bold, but what can one boy do against a hundred Apaches? You are crazed. I shall not allow you to carry out your mad purpose. We stop beside this water till the moon rises to-night; then we cross the desert. You shall stop with us and I will see that you go back."

With this he commanded the men to dismount and bade two of them have a care that Luis remained with them.

"As for los Gringos," he added, "they may go where they please. We want nothing of them."

For some reason Luis seemed awed and did not attempt to set his will against his uncle's. But when he told Phil of his uncle's words that young gentleman was angry indeed.

"Says you shall go back, does he?" gritted Phil. "Virtually makes you a prisoner, does he? The old sinner! What are you going to do, Luis?"

"Hush! Speak lower, for many of the men can understand your language as well as their own. I shall bide my time and escape. I mean to know to a certainty what my sister's fate was."

"Good fer yees, Lulu, me b'y!" put in Barney. "We will stand at yer bark tell the cows come home. Begorra! Oi belave we kin lick the stuff in' out av the haythen Grasers onnybow. If yees will jist say the worrud we will pitch inther thim."

"No. I must watch my time, and then get away as best I can. You had better go on."

"Not without you, Luis," said Phil, with feeling. "We will stand by you through thick and thin."

"It's spakin' the trooth yees are now, Phillup, me jewil."

"Friends, I thank you," came earnestly from the young Spaniard's lips. "Your kindness shall not be forgotten."

The Mexicans were not pleased when they found the boys were not going on and many

were the black looks cast toward Phil and Barney.

"A thavin' gang av pirates," growled the Irish lad. "It's the throats av us they would be after cuttin' fer the foon av the thim."

"You are right," admitted Phil, speaking in a low tone. "Be careful not to get into any trouble with them. If they are not robbers and cut-throats I am deceived. Don Mendoza is the perfect image of a bandit chief as I imagine such a person would look. Luis has fallen into bad hands and we must stand by him till he gets out."

It did not take Don Mendoza and his followers long to settle down in the shade of the matted timber which bordered the shallow stream of water. They had plenty of food, and as soon as the horses were watered and picketed to feed, they satisfied their own hunger. Then they stretched themselves in the most shady spots to sleep or smoke or gamble the time away with packs of greasy cards.

Two of them built a small fire to cook the hind quarters of an antelope they had killed, and it was the smoke of this fire that attracted the attention of Aztec Jack.

Phil and Barney also settled down to spend the day in a lazy way, both of them appearing quite at ease, although within his bosom the former was far from being so. They lay on their blankets and talked in low tones, closely watching everything around them.

Luis Servedo had apparently grown despondent and disheartened, for he flung himself down in the shade and seemed to pay no attention to anything around him. His guards soon decided that time spent in watching him was wasted and set about enjoying themselves with a pack of cards.

Slowly the long hours wore away. Once Don Mendoza came and tried to talk with Luis, but the gritty young Spaniard would have very little to say with his uncle, and finally the Don turned away, muttering a disgusted and angry oath.

Midday came. The boys ate a lunch and removed their horses to a more sheltered spot, then they once more lay down in the shade and watched the dark-faced gang around them, who seemed to have forgotten their existence.

All the long afternoon Luis Servedo lay face downward on the ground, scarcely looking up at all. His friends were puzzled by his strange actions, for he seemed to have quite given himself up to despair. Don Mendoza observed this and smiled with cruel satisfaction.

The afternoon slipped away and darkness shrouded the plain. Still the followers of the Spanish Don showed no signs of moving. Many of them wrapped themselves in their serapes and stretched at full length on the ground to enjoy refreshing slumber. By the light of a little fire Luis Servedo's guards gambled on, little dreaming the one they were to watch had crept away in the shadows.

An hour after darkness settled Phil felt a light touch on his arm, and turned swiftly to see a dark figure crouching at his side.

"Hist!" came the whispered voice of the Spanish youth. "If you would live, follow me! We are all to be slain within another hour! It is freedom or death now! Come on, and move with the caution of a serpent."

CHAPTER XIII.

ESCAPE—A CRY OF DISTRESS.

BOTH Phil and Barney plainly heard the words which Luis Servedo whispered—words which set their hearts throbbing with new excitement. To be slain within an hour! In some way the young Spaniard had learned the bloody plans of the dark-faced gang. They must escape or die.

It did not seem that it would be a very difficult thing to escape the vigilance of the guards, who were still playing cards by the light of the little fire a few feet away. Phil and Barney had kept their weapons close at hand all the day, feeling it would not do to let them pass out of their sight for an instant if they ever wished to see them again. Now all they had to do was to get upon their knees and, holding fast to their rifles, crawl silently along after Luis, keeping in the deep shadows of the matted brush which lined the stream.

The two gamblers by the little fire laughed and swore. An owl hooted dimly in the distance. A soft wind, sweet with the perfume of wild flowers, whispered mysteriously amid the leaves of the trees along the little stream.

With the silence of as many shadows the three boys crept slowly away, scarcely daring to draw a full breath. Every moment they expected to hear an outcry which would announce that their movement had been discovered.

But the gambling guards must have been in the midst of a very exciting game, for they appeared to have forgotten the existence of the boys. Finally Luis arose to his feet, and Phil and Barney followed his example.

"Begorra!" hoarsely whispered the Irish lad. "This is whut Oi call circumnavvygatin' the haythen. Lulu, yoo're a darlint!"

"Silence!" commanded the young Spaniard.

"We are not yet escaped."

"We must have our horses," ventured Phil.

"They await us. Follow."

Then Luis once more led them on.

In a few moments they saw the dark forms of four horses standing in a clump, and Phil and Barney gripped their rifles nervously as they espied the dark figure of a man standing close by the horses, as silent and as motionless as a marble statue.

"Howly Mither!" gasped the little Irishman.

"We are caught intoirely!"

"It is a friend," whispered Luis, and they kept on.

They reached the horses and found them guarded by a Mexican—one of Don Mendoza's band. But the man had formerly been in the employ of Manuel Servedo, and gratefully remembered Luis for some friendly act. He it was who had warned the Spanish youth of the terrible danger which threatened him and his "Gringo" companions.

"Is everything ready?" asked Luis, speaking in English.

"St, senor."

"You shall not be forgotten, Pietro," taking the Mexican's hand and passing one arm around his neck as a mark of great esteem. "Don Mendoza will not always triumph."

Then the three lads noiselessly swung themselves into their saddles. Just as they did so there was a loud outcry from the camp and several forms were seen moving hastily about in the firelight.

"They have discovered our escape," said Luis, quite coolly; "but they cannot stop us now. Buenas noches, Pietro."

And thus calmly bidding the Mexican good-night, he touched his black steed with the spurs and was away with Phil and Barney close behind him.

But the Irish lad was not able to restrain his feeling of triumph, so he gave a yell which might have been heard a mile. He was answered by furious cries from the camp.

"Whoop 'er oop, ye sl'apy bids!" laughed Barney. "It's mighty little good it will do yees."

Straight toward the mountains the young Spaniard led them, knowing that if the pursuit should prove very persistent, they could escape followers much easier amid the gorges and ravines.

For a time they could hear sounds of pursuit, but these gradually grew fainter and fainter and finally ceased entirely.

"We are clear of them for to-night, senors," observed Luis, drawing rein and allowing his horse to proceed more slowly. "It is fortunate for us that we are."

"Thanks to you," said Phil.

"Thanks to Pietro Nunaz, you should say. But for him, I might have delayed making an attempt to escape until it would have been much too late. He told me of the plot to slay us all and he prepared the horses while I crept back to tell you of our danger."

"Well, he is a white man, to say the least. But, Luis, little pard, that uncle of yours is a dirty skunk."

"He is a wicked man, Senor Phil. I have discovered that and my eyes are now open. He can deceive me no more."

"Bully fer yees, Lulu! The auld hoodlum looks loike Mike Donagan, who rose to a very hoigh station in loife just before he died. He rose at the ind av a rope and hoong within six inches av the limb av a tree. It was Tom Casey's horrus he hid been afther borrowin' an' fergittin' t' return the b'aste."

"What are you going to do now, Luis?" asked Phil.

"I shall try to find my sister."

"Your sister! She is dead."

"No, senor, she is not. Don Mendoza did not tell the truth. Pietro says she is alive. He says the Indians were not Indians at all, but were some of the Don's men, thus disguised, and were led by the *Americano* who has been paying her attentions. The pursuit was no pursuit at all, and Anita's captors have kept on into the desert beyond the mountains. For what place they were bound Pietro did not know."

"Whew!" whistled Phil, in amazement. "This is interesting news, indeed. So you hope to rescue your sister?"

"I do. In some way I will find and save her if she lives."

"I admire your pluck, lad, and I will stand by you to the end. You may count on me to do what I can to help you."

"An' me, too, begorra!"

"You are kind, senors, and I shall not forget it. I will not take you out of your way, for our paths lie together."

"If Harry were only here he would be all right, now. I am worried about the boy. We may never see him again. The only thing we can do is push on and trust to fortune to bring us together all right. We shall stand a better chance of finding him further on than we shall anywhere in this section. I hope we shall strike him on the border of the next desert."

They rode onward through the night, till at least an hour after the moon rose. By that

time they had penetrated some distance into the fastnesses of the mountains, and Luis proposed they halt until morning. This was agreed to, and they stopped in a secluded spot.

That night a strict guard was kept over the camp, but they were not disturbed. They arose early, ate a hearty breakfast, and once more moved onward, bearing to the east of the course they had pursued the night before, so that they would pass round the most mountainous section. They knew they were close to the homes of the cliff-dwellers, but they had no time to push their way through the mountains and examine the singular sights to be met with there.

The mountains were rather barren on the north, but were fertile and heavily timbered on the south, the trees being mostly pinion pine. The valleys were often pleasant and inviting, being thickly covered with lush-grass and masses of wild-flowers, which delighted the eye.

But although they avoided the wildest section, the boys found difficulties enough to surmount. There were places where the way was almost impassable, on account of huge boulders and fallen timber. There were steep and dangerous paths to follow—paths made by the hand of nature. But they pushed steadily on, overcoming every difficulty.

Once during the day they saw a party of Indians passing in a valley below them. Luis said they were Moquis, and therefore peaceably inclined, but they all felt better when they saw the red-men disappear, and knew their presence in the mountains had not been discovered.

At one time, from their position near the summit of a low mountain, they could catch a glimpse of a Moquis town several miles away, on the top of a mountain whose peak seemed to have been cut off as if done with a huge knife.

Their progress was necessarily slow, and, although they had made quite a start on the journey the night before, it was not till sunset that they finally reached the northern limit of the mountainous section and found the undulating plains before them, with the desert in the distance. They camped for the night near a "water hole."

Phil was still worrying about Harry, but Barney seemed happy as a wild bird, now and then breaking out into snatches of rollicking Irish songs. Luis was moody and silent, his dark face wearing a look of unrest.

"Swate Mowsee!" cried Barney, as he lay on the grass and kicked up his heels. "This is whut Oi call plisent enjoymint afther a barrud day's worruck. If you fellys don't fale thit way, it must be bacause ye fale some ither way. Oi am bound t' take loife aisy, as the mon sid whin he cut another gentleman's throat."

"Oh, me name is Barney Brady,

An' me mither is a lady

Thit is fit t' do the washin' av a king;

It's me fayther loves her dearly,

Sittin' in the corner yearly,

Fer it's niver will he do wan single thing."

"Listen!"

Luis had sprung to his feet and stood in a listening attitude. The others followed his example and faintly heard a far-away cry of distress, which came from out of the darkness of the great plain to the north. Following the cry, they heard the hoof-beats of a galloping horse.

"Howly Vargin!" breathed the Irish boy.

"Whut fer is it?"

"The cry of a woman in distress," answered Phil.

Nearer and nearer came the sound of the galloping horse, and the three boys listened breathlessly to hear the cry once more. It finally came sounding weirdly, plaintively, through the increasing darkness. In an instant Luis Servedo leaped toward his horse, fairly shrieking:

"*Madre de Dios!* It is Anita—it is my sister's voice!"

CHAPTER XIV.

THE BLACK DESERT IS REACHED.

STRAIGHT down toward the three Utes strode Aztec Jack, not a weapon in his hands. Harry Denton was amazed by the man's mad act, but he had no time to utter a word of remonstrance. Jack's words kept sounding in his head: "Ef they try ter wipe me out, sock it ter 'em. Ef you don't, they'll sock it ter me." With nervous haste the boy drew back the hammer of his rifle and waited, his eyes fastened on the four figures in the hollow.

Seeing the strange white man advancing toward them, the three Indians sprung to their feet grasping their weapons; but Jack never hesitated or halted. With his sunken but keenly glowing eyes fastened on the astonished red-men, he walked straight toward them. Uttering grunts of amazement, the Utes watched him approach.

"Hello, smoky-skins," was the mad Treasure-Seeker's greeting. "Reckon you wuz waitin' fer me, eh?"

"Ugh!" grunted one of the three who could speak a little English. "What white man want?"

"I want my hoss, ye derved p'isen imp!"

flashed Aztec Jack, his eyes gleaming dangerously.

"Injun not know white man," with a shake of the head that set the dirty feathers nodding.

"Waal, Injun is pritty derved apt ter git an interjuce what he won't like ef he don't keep his claws off white man's hoss. They hang white hoss-thieves in this part o' ther kentry, an' red ones are mighty sure ter git er dost o' ther same medicine. Savvy?"

"Black Cloud not understand."

"Don't, eh? Waal, so much ther wu'st fer Black Cloud. He is mighty apt ter wake up some fine mornin' an' fine hisself danglin' from ther limb o' er tree. Tbet's my hoss thar, an' I've come fer it."

"White man's hoss? How Injun know? White man lie mebbe. Him got ter prove."

"Prove nuthin'!" snarled Aztec Jack, his face dark with scorn. "Thet white critter is mine an' I hev come fer it."

"White man not have it," asserted the Indian, fingering his old rifle in a dangerous manner.

"Whut'll prevent, you dirty varmint?"

"Injun kill um."

For several moments the Desert Nomad glared at the three Utes as if he would rend them limb from limb, then, with a scornful laugh, he said:

"So thet is yer trick, is it? Waal, try it on ef ye want ter. Ther fu'st one as lifts a han' ag'in' me falls dead in an instant."

And without another word, the strange man turned his back to the three savages and walked toward his horse, utterly disdainful of danger. It was an act that filled the Utes with amazement. For a moment the one who had called himself Black Cloud seemed too surprised to make a move, then a deadly gleam shot from his black eyes and he swiftly lifted his rifle to his shoulder, taking a careful aim full at the white man's back.

Harry Denton had been an excited witness to all this. His amazement at Jack's bold manner and scornful words was great and he felt sure that the Indians would attempt to take the man's life. Harry had never taken human life, and he almost sickened at the thought of shooting even an uncivilized and half-human Ute savage; but Jack had trusted everything to him and had told him to shoot to kill if he saw a hostile move on the part of either of the red-men. The boy felt that the life of the mad Treasure-Seeker was in his hands and if he allowed the Indians to slay the man he would be no less a murderer than if he shot one of them in defense of his companion's life.

As Aztec Jack turned and walked carelessly toward the white horse, appearing to have forgotten the presence of the three Utes, the concealed boy saw Black Cloud lift his rifle and take deliberate aim at the white man's back. Harry had been trembling with excitement, but as he saw his friend's terrible danger he became cool and steady-nerved in an instant. His Winchester fairly leaped to his shoulder, his finger pressed the trigger, then came a puff of white smoke, a ringing report and the death-yell of the bullet-stricken red-man!

The soft breeze bore the smoke away and the staring eyes of the youth with the rifle looked upon a terrible sight—the last spasmodic struggles of a dying human being. Black Cloud was laying on the ground, his red band beating and tearing at the grass around him. His friends were running for the nearest cover, while Aztec Jack had reached the side of the white horse and was calmly adjusting the saddle, not even having cast a look over his shoulder!

Just as the two frightened warriors disappeared in the depths of a mass of brushwood Harry sent a bullet whistling over their heads, thinking to hurry them on by doing so.

Having arranged the saddle, Jack mounted the white horse and was soon at the side of the boy who had saved his life.

"Jump up, little pard," he said, quietly. "We must be movin' along. Jump up behind tell we reach your critter."

Without a word, Harry did so, and the noble white steed bore them swiftly away.

"You did thet job very pritty, lad," observed Aztec Jack. "You pumped ther lead ter ther varmint jest whar he lived an' throwed him cold. You're a boy ter tie to!"

"But I hated to do it," said Harry, regretfully.

"Hated ter, lad—why did ye?"

"It was a human being."

"Is that the way ye look at it, lad? Ther critter wuzn't only bafe-human."

"But it seemed like murder."

"Boy, I am glad you feel that way," came earnestly from the old man's lips. "There are too many youngers o' your age who would think it a fine thing to take a human life. But you needn't waste much sympathy ontar a p'isen Ute. They hain't but one step above ther brutes. Besides thet, it wuz ther red whelp's life or mine. Don't ye ever lose a bit o' sleep over it, Harry."

"I am afraid I shall. The horrible sight of that Indian as he lay struggling on the ground and tearing at the grass will haunt me, I fear."

They soon reached the place where Harry had

left his horse. The boy drew a sigh of relief when he once more found himself astride his own animal.

"Now which way, Jack?"

"Ter ther norrud. We will camp somewhar in ther mountings ter-night. Reckon I'd orter set ther bossas o' them p'isen Utes adrift an' stampeded 'em. They'll be pritty tarnal sure ter foller us. We hev got ter kiver our trail."

"How can we do it?"

"Dunno, boy. It'll be er pritty hard job mounted ez we are. Ef we wuz afoot we c'd do it. Anyhow, we'll bother ther red skunks. Reckon it'd bin better ef all three on 'em hed bin wiped out."

"I might have dropped another, but I didn't have the heart."

"Give them the chance to lift your ha'r an' see ef they'll hev ther heart."

Aztec Jack pushed straight on into the mountains, taking care to pass over ground that would leave a very faint trail. Once they came upon a stream of water and entered it as if to follow its course to the southeast, but soon turned their horses and followed it toward its source. They finally left it at a point where the ground was very hard and barren.

Then Jack halted and produced some "mufflers" which he proceeded to strap upon the feet of the white steed.

"They'll bother ther varmints er leetle," he declared. "If we only hed er set fer your critter, Harry, we'd be all right. As it is, we've got ter make some."

With a sharp knife he cut four square pieces from a thick Moquis Indian blanket. To these he attached some stout buckskin thongs and then skillfully bound them upon the feet of Harry's horse.

"They'll stay fer awhile," he said. "Ther shoes'll cut through arter a little. Can't fool ther critters very bad with ther trick anyhow, but it'll bother 'em some."

It was not long before one of the pieces worked from the left forward foot of Harry's horse, then Jack made another halt and removed all the mufflers.

"We'll trust ter luck an' keep a sharp eye out fer snags now," he observed. "It's gittin' clost onter night, and we will hev ter hold up soon."

They chose a secluded spot in the depths of a little pocket as a camping place and took turns at standing guard during the night. They were not disturbed save by the howling of prowling animals which kept up their dismal cries through the entire night.

In the morning Jack succeeded in shooting a small antelope, and they ventured to build a fire to cook the meat.

"It may bring ther redimps down onter us," said the old man grimly; "but we've got ter eat."

After breakfast they once more started onward. Their way now led them along the winding gulches and ravines with the mountains on either hand. Their progress was of a necessity much slower and more laborious than it would have been on the open plains. Jack bore to the east as much as the nature of the country would allow, saying he had no desire to pass through the heart of the mountainous region, upon the lofty table-lands of which stood at least sixty Moquis towns, half of which were deserted, however.

Near the middle of the day Harry espied an Indian watching them from a lofty crag, but he vanished from view before Jack could get a look at him. It was plain that their presence in the mountains had been discovered.

They were finally forced to give their horses a "breathing spell," but they moved onward as soon as the animals were somewhat rested.

It was near night when they left the foothills behind and reached the rolling plain. Aztec Jack drew a great breath of relief as he pointed away toward the level waste to the north, saying:

"Thar, lad, lays ther Black Desert—ther desert o' death—in ther heart o' which is ther Mystic Land. Ef we ever cross ther sand and alkali beds we are shore ter find ther place o' which I hev tole ye—ther Buried Aztec City. An' ef we come back, we'll be rich ez kings!"

CHAPTER XV.

A SUCCESSION OF STARTLING EVENTS.

THEY were forced to ride along the border of the plain several miles before they found water. They finally decided to camp beside a tiny stream near the mouth of a small valley that debouched upon the open plain. The valley was thickly wooded near the spring, and, choosing a spot that was quite surrounded by the thick brush, they built a small fire by which to cook a brace of sage-hens Harry had shot with his revolver. Jack thought there was little danger of the fire betraying their whereabouts after dark, for the smoke could not be seen at a distance and the light would be screened by the surrounding brush.

After the hens had been cooked and they had eaten their supper, Harry proposed that they keep a small blaze going for a time, and Jack

did not object. The old man produced and lit a black clay pipe, then he lay back and watched the fire while he smoked, seeming rather gloomy and sad.

Harry was not in a talkative mood, and so silence fell between them, the only sounds being the faint crackling of the fire and those made by the horses, which were grazing two rods away. The youthful fortune-hunter could not help worrying about his friends from whom he had been parted by fortune. He wondered if they would keep on toward the Mystic Land without him, trusting fate to bring them together, but he little dreamed how near the boys were at that moment.

Finally, Harry fell to watching the face of his singular companion. Aztec Jack seemed utterly oblivious of his surroundings and his pallid features were strangely convulsed as he glared savagely into the little fire, his eyes gleaming with a light that caused a chill to run over the boy. The man's bearded lips were working, although not a sound came from them, and now and then his teeth would be exposed like those of an enraged beast. Even his long white beard moved convulsively, the separate hairs seeming to twist and squirm like tiny serpents before the eyes of the startled youth. The man's fingers were drawn up like the claws of some monster bird of prey and his pipe lay unnoticed on the ground.

Then Aztec Jack looked like a madman indeed.

"He is going into another fit!" was the thought that flashed through Harry's mind.

The boy felt that he ought to speak to the man and try to arouse him, but his tongue seemed chained and he continued to watch the horrible sight like one fascinated.

Suddenly Jack lifted his eyes from the fire and seemed to gaze straight over Harry's head. The next instant he leaped to his feet, uttering a wild cry as he stretched out his hand and pointed toward the bushes. Involuntarily Harry turned his head, and he was amazed to see the bearded face of a man who had parted the bushes and was staring at the two campers, amazement written on his features.

"Ah-ah!" shrieked Aztec Jack. "Found at last, you demon!"

The unknown did not stir or make reply, but his eyes were fixed upon the face of the speaker and he seemed stricken dumb with amazement.

An owl hooted weirdly in the distance.

"Where is my child, treacherous devil?" shouted the mad Treasure-Seeker. "You killed the mother and stole the child! Where is my little one?"

There was no reply.

"Speak, fiend!" thundered the strange man, starting forward—"speak, or I will tear your carcass limb from limb! I have been hunting for you long—so long! Now I have found you I will know the truth if I have to wrest it from your false black heart! Speak I say!"

The man behind the bushes still remained motionless and silent.

"Ah-ah!" came gratingly through the teeth of the deranged. "You will not speak? You dare not! I have hunted you down at last and—I will—Oh-ah!"

Uttering a terrible groan, he fell heavily to the ground, frothing at the mouth like a mad-dog.

With a cry of horror, Harry sprung toward the fallen man and quickly turned him on his back. He saw that Jack had become unconscious, his eyes fully open, but rolled so far up into his head that nothing but the whites of them were visible. If the lad had not seen him several times in a similar state he would have believed him surely dead.

He quickly procured some water from the spring and began to bathe the face of the unconscious man, vigorously chafing his wrists and temples. Still there was not a sign of life.

Harry looked toward the spot where the unknown man had been peering through the bushes, but the face had disappeared. He was quite alone with his unconscious friend.

The youth was strangely puzzled by the dramatic scene he had witnessed. He felt that the stranger was not unknown to Aztec Jack and that they were enemies.

Suddenly he heard the sound of far-away cries which seemed to come from the open plain. He listened closely and heard the cries repeated.

"What can that mean?" he asked himself, leaping to his feet. "Things are beginning to stir like peas in a boiling pot. There it is again!"

Quickly he made his way to the mouth of the valley and stood listening for further sounds. Far out on the plain he could hear the sound of galloping horses, and in a few moments he once more heard the shouts. In an instant Harry became greatly excited.

"That was Barney's voice!" he cried, as he rushed toward the spot where his horse was tethered. "The boys are out there! I must intercept them or they will pass on without knowing I am here."

He hastily slipped the bridle on his horse, but did not pause to adjust the saddle, feeling he

could not spare the time. Poor Aztec Jack was quite forgotten in his wild excitement.

Three minutes later he was out upon the rolling plain, riding toward the point where he could still hear the beat of many hoofs. Now and then he heard a cry which guided him.

"I must reach them some way!" he exclaimed.

"On, Ned, old boy! Do your duty now!" Soon he could detect two dark forms sweeping past at right angles with his course. He turned his horse so that he would cut them off, at the same time shouting the names of the boys. At first it seemed to do no good. They either did not hear or they believed him a foe. But he kept in sight of the two forms and continued to call to Phil and Barney. Finally they halted, and he heard Barney call back:

"Is thit you, Harry, b'y?"

"Yes, yes! Hold on!"

"Faith, an' thit is whut we are afther. doin' av. Hurro! It's thickled t' dith Oi am t' see yees!"

In a few moments Harry reached the two lads and felt his hands warmly grasped by Phil and Barney.

"By gracious, old boy!" cried Phil, heartily, as he nearly wrenched Harry's arm out of its socket; "this is the greatest piece of good fortune I ever heard of in my life! It does my eyes good to see you again, pard!"

"Begorra, thit is so! It's niver did Oi expect t' rist me peepers on the loikes av ye ag'in, Harry. They are so astonished now thit Oi am afereed av a roosh av blood t' me hid. Sw'ate Mowsses on the mountain-top! Oi fale loike sphlittin' me throax with wan good howl av joy!"

"Good fortune has brought us together again," laughed Harry. "I was afraid fate would not be so kind. But where is Luis?"

"He is somewhere ahead there," explained Phil. "He is pursuing a girl on a runaway horse, and he says the girl is his sister. We did our level best, but our horses would drop behind. They are no match for that black of his."

"Oi belave thit crayther has a pair av wings hitched t' it somewheer," declared Barney.

"But where is your saddle, Harry?" asked Phil.

"I left it at the camp back here a piece. I heard Barney's shouts and the sound of galloping horses, which told me you were passing near. I knew I had no time to lose if I would overtake you, so I did not stop to saddle Ned. If I had done so you would have been so far away that my attempt to overtake you would have been a failure."

"But now what is to be done? It is folly to think of overtaking Luis. Our horses are not able to do so."

"I propose that we go to the camp by the spring. Indeed, I must return at once, for I left Aztec Jack there in one of his worst fits. If he is not attended to he may die!"

This seemed the best thing they could do under the circumstances, so they headed their horses toward the hills where lay the little valley Harry had lately left. As they rode along they related the various adventures which they had met since becoming separated, and, as may be imagined, their stories caused great wonder, for they sounded very much like selections from a highly dramatic novel.

"Howly S'int Patherick!" exclaimed Barney, when he had listened to Harry's surprising narrative. "Is it a bit av a fairy-tale ye are givin' us Oi'd loike t' know?"

"It is nothing but the Gospel truth, and I will guarantee it does not sound a bit more improbable than the yarn Phil has told of your adventures with Indians and Mexican brigands."

"Well," observed Phil, drawing a deep breath, "all I have to say is we should thank our lucky stars we are alive. This country seems full of dangers."

"An' Injins," put in the Irish lad. "The rid naygers are thick as floies."

"I scarcely know how Aztec Jack will look upon you fellows," said Harry. "Now that he is not dead, he seems to think he and I alone should share the lost treasure of the Buried City. But I am ready to divide my share with you if ever there is any treasure discovered. If the man tells the truth there is more gold than we can hope to bring away at one time. But we shall soon see how Jack feels about it."

A few minutes later they reached the mouth of the little valley. Harry pushed rapidly forward, and soon came to the circle of matted brush, through which they could catch the gleam of the fire.

Leaping from his horse, he made his way through the bushes, closely followed by Phil and Barney; but when they reached the opening lighted by the fire they made a surprising discovery.

Aztec Jack was gone!

CHAPTER XVI.

ACROSS THE DESERT TO THE MYSTIC LAND.

"GREAT Christopher!" cried Harry Denton, in amazement; "Aztec Jack is gone!"

"Gone!" echoed Phil Strong.

"Yes, gone. I left him lying right there within four feet of this fire. Now where is he?" "Worra, worra!" groaned Barney Brady. "It's Satan's own trick the crayther has played on yees! If he is no ghost it's the Divil hisself he must be."

"I cannot understand it," declared Harry, shaking his head soberly. "The man was in one of his worst fits when I left him, but now he is gone. By gracious! there may have been foul play here!"

He bent forward and examined the grass closely, having first thrown a little wood on the fire to make a brighter blaze; but his scrutiny was unrewarded, for he discovered no suspicious signs.

"It may be that he came round while I was absent," confessed the puzzled lad. "Perhaps he has wandered away in one of his strange forgetful spells. Let's see if his horse is gone."

Examination showed that horse, saddle and accouterments were missing.

"It looks as if he suddenly took it into his head to slide out, and slid," said Harry. "He has probably gone off on a wild search for the man whom he saw gazing at him over the bushes. They are deadly enemies I believe—enemies of bygone years. There will be blood shed if they ever meet."

"Well, what's to be done now?" questioned Phil.

For some time they discussed the situation, hardly knowing what was the best move to make. Barney proposed they follow Luis, but it was plain to the others that such a move would be the height of folly, for the Spanish lad was already out of hearing on the night-enshrouded desert. Besides that, their horses were not equals of his in speed and endurance and they could not hope to overtake him. At length they decided to return to the spot where they had encamped for the night, for Luis might make his way back to that place and find them there.

"As for Aztec Jack," said Harry, "we shall have to let him take care of himself."

"The Auld B'y always takes care av his own," asserted Barney.

An hour later they had again settled down for the night at the place decided on. They built no fire, knowing they would be safer without the blaze to betray their whereabouts. For a long time they sat wrapped in their blankets and talked over the events of the past three days. The night air that came from the plain had a chilling, icy touch in great contrast to the burning winds which swept the desert through the day. From out of the darkness to the north came the occasional bark of a prowling coyote, and now and then the gray wolf would be heard back among the hills. The prairie wolf—often called the coyote—is seldom or never seen in Arizona. The genuine coyote is a miserable little cur of an animal scarcely larger than a fox, and is often seen skurrying across the barren plains or flitting amid the sage brush and cacti.

Finally, Phil and Harry lay down to sleep, leaving Barney to act as guard during the first portion of the night. Later on he was relieved by Phil, whose place was finally taken by Harry.

Morning came, but Luis Servedo had not returned. Once more the boys found themselves in a quandary concerning the best course to pursue, but a lengthy discussion resulted in an agreement to remain in that vicinity another day. During that time Luis might return.

They selected a secluded spot at the very foot of the hills, the position being a favorable one for overlooking the plain, yet being such that they would be hidden from any one approaching from the north.

Phil struck out into the hills and returned two hours later with the rear quarters of a goat antelope. The boys ventured to build a fire to cook the meat, but extinguished it as soon as that was done.

The day passed without adventure, and they saw no living human being besides themselves. But they did not regret the delay, for they knew they had a trying journey before them.

They decided to start soon after moonrise, and travel as far as possible during the cool hours of the night. Their horses were in excellent condition, being greatly refreshed by the rest they had obtained—a rest which they had required more than their riders.

Midnight found the young treasure-seekers out upon the Black Desert with their faces turned toward the north. They had decided it was useless to wait longer for Luis Servedo, for, if the Spanish lad had overtaken his sister, it was possible he at once turned his face toward the south where lay his home.

It was a singular journey through the silence of the night across the moonlit desert. The only sounds which greeted the ears of the three lads were the barking of coyotes, the hoot of the prairie owl, and the steady crunching of the sand beneath the hoofs of their animals. All around them lay the unshapely shadows of the sage-brush and cacti, and their own shadows, like black phantoms, kept close beside them, stealing silently along.

At daybreak they looked back and saw the mountains and flat mesas of Tusayan sinking in

the plain. Straight ahead they could discern nothing but the unbroken desert across which the sun was throwing his morning launces of gold.

At midday the mountains behind them were almost hidden by a purple haze, while they seemed to have sunk to the magnitude of large hills. But still the unbroken plain lay before them. The sun beat down pitilessly, half-blinding them with its intense glare, making their skin feel dry and cracked and their lips parched. The dust from the sand and alkali beds had settled over them in a thick coat. But still they pressed on, taking no heed of the long-legged jack rabbit that bounded from the sage-brush and went scuttling away with the speed of the wind or the lazy buzzard that wheeled into the air high above their heads and uttered his harsh cry.

The horses were suffering for water, but there was no water in that arid waste around them. Once they saw the mirage of a beautiful lake surrounded by shade-giving trees. It lay directly in their path, but as they hurried on to reach it it retreated before them and finally vanished, thus betraying its true nature.

"Oh, musha, musha!" groaned Barney. "It's did we will be intoirly before we iver git out av this! The pore little girrul bark at the hash-thunder will niver sit eyes on Barney Brady ag'in! Whoy did Oi iver lave Auld Ireland, Oi dunno!"

Scarcely a word did Harry or Phil speak, but they kept their eyes toward the north, hoping to see the two small mountains of which Aztec Jack had told—mountains which stood in the very heart of the Mystic Land. The afternoon was half spent before they were rewarded by discerning two distant peaks which seemed to rise out of the plain by imperceptible degrees. When they looked back they discovered that the mountains of Tusayan had vanished or been swallowed up in the haze.

They were finally forced to give their horses a rest, but as soon as they thought best they once more pushed on. At sunset the two mountains loomed up boldly before them, looking only a few miles away, but they knew there were yet many miles to travel. Once more they gave their exhausted animals a rest and then pushed forward again.

It was long past midnight when they reached the border of the Mystic Land and camped beside a small stream the water of which flowed into the desert and disappeared beneath the burning sand. Their relief and the delight of the horses can be much better imagined than described.

"This stream," said Harry, as they sat on the bank and ate and drank till satisfied, "is the one which Aztec Jack calls Lost River. If we follow it up, we shall reach the little lake of which he told. The lake is formed by boiling springs and is the source of this stream."

This the boys afterward discovered was true.

That night they all slept soundly, for they were quite exhausted. A pretense at standing guard was made, but it was scarcely more than a pretense. However, they were undisturbed by man or beast.

In the morning they found themselves so sore and tired that they had no desire to explore the fertile country in the heart of the desert which they had reached at last. They only cared to recline in the shade and take life easy.

Close at hand the mountains rose above their heads, one being fertile and well timbered, the other rocky and barren. This latter they decided, was the extinct volcano of which the mad Treasure-Seeker had spoken—the mountain which had vomited forth fire, smoke, ashes and huge boulders, thus working the destruction of the old Aztec city. They could but wonder if it would ever break forth again.

The boys saw that Aztec Jack had not told a falsehood when he declared the country around the mountains to resemble a little Eden. The grass was thick and nutritious, the trees green and beautiful. Gay plumaged birds flitted here and there, seeming quite tame and careless of the presence of man. Everywhere a mass of flowers could be seen. The grass was bespangled with flowers and the vines which hung from the branches of the trees was loaded with them. The air was sweet with their perfume.

The boys spent the greater part of the day in resting and sleeping, but toward night Harry declared he could not remain inactive any longer and would take a look around. As Phil and Barney did not seem inclined to accompany him, he wandered away alone with his rifle over his shoulder. Some time after he disappeared, his comrades heard the sharp, ringing report of his rifle come echoing back from the mountain-side. Half an hour later he returned to camp with a young antelope thrown across his shoulders.

"We need not starve," he declared. "This little oasis is alive with game."

They did not venture to kindle a fire till after darkness had fallen, and then they built it in a sheltered spot so that its light could not be seen at a great distance.

When the meat was thoroughly cooked, they sat down on the ground to enjoy a feast. Bare-

ly had they done so when a soft step sounded close at hand, the figure of a man stalked out of the surrounding shadows, and, calmly snatching a piece of sizzling meat from the glowing coals, the new-comer seated himself on the ground close by, quietly observing:

"Putty nice sort o' evenin' fer this year time o' the season, pards."

CHAPTER XVII.

MOHAVE MAT—PHIL PULLS TRIGGER.

THE stranger seemed utterly regardless of the fact that the moment he appeared within the circle of light he had been "covered" by cocked weapons held in the hands of the three boys. Seating himself on the ground with the remark given at the close of the last chapter, he began to coolly eat the meat which he had removed from the coals, having first given it a vigorous "blowing," to cool it somewhat.

He was a medium-sized man, rather stoutly built, with a dark, swarthy face, drooping mustache and pointed imperial, which gave him a wild, brigandish look. His complexion was dark enough for a Mexican, but the boys decided he was of American blood, even though his attire was the gaudy dress of the Southwest border—velveteen jacket, laced calzoneros, spurred botas, scarlet sash, black sombrero, and other things to correspond.

Despite the man's dark skin his eyes were of a peculiar, glittering blue that was unpleasant to look upon. There seemed something wrong about them—they appeared at a disadvantage in their natural surroundings.

"Putty nice sort o' evenin'," repeated the stranger, finding his first remark to that effect unanswered.

"Howly S'int Patherick!" gasped Barney Brady. "Did yees iver say the loikes av thit, now! It's the chake av it thit knocks the wind out av me, complatly. Pitch roight in an' make ye'self at home, Misther Mon; Gard hilps thim as hilps thimsilves."

"Thankee, thankee, bog-trotter," nodded the stranger, speaking between bites. "You hain't quite as big er fool as ye look."

For a moment Barney was speechless with amazement and anger, then he leaped to his feet, uttering a whoop that might have been heard a mile.

"Wurro!" he bellowed, doubling up his hands and working his arms up and down in a frantic manner. "It is a bog-trotter ye durst call me, ye dirty spalpeen av a thimblejiggin' clown, ye! Begorra! ye're a bigger fule thin ye iver looked t' be, an' ye look loike ye didn't know enough ter pound sand! A bog-trotter! Oh, Mither av Moses! Git up heur, ye dirty bla'guard, an' Oi will knock the two eyes av ye inther a cocked hat! Whoop—hurro!"

Like one demented the angry Irish boy pranced round the stranger, frantically shaking his clinched fists at the man, who calmly continued eating, not even venturing to look at the furious boy. It was a comical sight to see the little Irishman dance around the man, who seemed scarcely aware of his presence, and despite their surprise at the presumptuous manner of the unknown, Harry and Phil could not repress a burst of laughter.

"Laurrf, will yees!" yelled Barney, becoming still more excited as he witnessed the mirth of his comrades. "Sit there an' grin while thit nasty-toonged crayther insults ye t' yer face? Whoy don't ye git up an' knock the stoofn' out av the loikes av him, Oi dunno? Begorra! Oi kin lick him alone if he iver durst git onther his fate at all, at all."

"Oh, set down, Irisher," drawled the stranger. "I didn't mean ter git ye onter yer mad, an' if I sed ennything I hadn't oughter, I'm reddy ter 'pollygize."

"An' do yees 'pollergoise fer carlin' av me a bog-trotter?"

"Of course I do if that will satisfy ye. I will call ye ennythin' ye like, only I wish you'd quit the howlin' in my ear. I am apt ter git nervous if ye keeps it up, an' w'en I gits nervous I shoots, an' w'en I shoots somethin' draps."

Barney cooled almost as rapidly as he had become excited.

"If yees 'pollergoise thit settles it," he said, a good-natured smile beginning to draw back the corners of his large mouth. "Oi am not the mon t' trid onther annybody's corns whin they be after 'pollergoisin' loike a gintleman. Lit's shake hands onther it."

The stranger willingly grasped the Irish boy's hand and gave it a grip that caused Barney to dance and give utterance to another howl, this time one of pain.

"Oh-oo! sw'ate Vargin Mary!" he groaned, holding up his hand, which looked as if it had been pressed in a vise. "Will ye look at thit now! It's almost crushed it is complatly," as he began to pull the fingers apart, with his face twisted into a comical look of anguish. "Oi will niver hiv the use av thit any more, Oi am thinkin'. Will wan av yees be koind enough t' take a sharrup knife an' cut off me arrum off clost ter me ilbow. Oi hiv no further nade av the parrut balow."

"Beg pardon, Irish, if I pressed yer han' er

dite hard," said the stranger, soberly. "I fer-got ye wuz only a boy, so I must have given ye a man's grip."

"A mon's grip! Be me faith, it was the grip av a goiant!"

"Whar you fellers frum?" asked the stranger, when Barney had once more seated himself by the fire.

"It seems to me," declared Harry, "it is our place to ask you that question. Where are you from and who are you?"

The man laughed shortly, as he replied:

"Hev it ter suit yerselves, younkens. I am from all over, an' I am usually called Mohave Mat, the Mustang. It is my business ketchin' an' breakin' mustangs an' wild hosses. It's gittin' ter be pritty tarnal pore business in these hyer days, but I sticks ter it 'cause I likes it. It is a wild, free life, full o' excitement an' adventure, an' I jest can't live without a certain amount o' thet.—Now, who mought you folks be?"

Harry gave their names, but took care to make no mention of their business. He did not like the looks of the mustanger very well, and he felt that the man would yet cause them trouble.

"I don't reckon you fellers hev seen ennythin' o' my hoss, hev ye?" questioned the man, gazing searchingly into their faces as he spoke. "I've lost him—ther best critter I ever owned—pure white. He hed ther speed o' ther wind, an' I w'dn't 'a' taken five thousan' fer him."

"Aztec Jack's White Cloud!" was the thought which flashed through Harry's mind.

But at that moment Harry heard a slight rustling in the bushes near at hand, and was startled to see a man peering at them from out of a mass of foliage. His surprise quickly turned to amazement as he recognized the face as one he had seen before. For a few moments he remained motionless staring straight at the face of the prowler, then he leapt to his feet, crying:

"Look there!"

His companions looked in the direction indicated by his pointing finger and saw the face revealed by the firelight. Phil and Barney uttered exclamations of surprise, but Mohave Mat gave vent to a cry that was half an oath and half an expression of fear. The Mustang seemed even more amazed than Harry.

When he saw that his presence was detected, the unknown started back and stood for an instant as if undecided whether it was best to flee or stand his ground. In that instant Harry cried:

"Great Caesar! That is the very man we saw the night Aztec Jack had the fit!"

Quick as a flash the strange man turned and vanished in the dark shadows of the vine-covered trees.

A dead silence fell upon the little camp beside Lost River. For a time not one of the four persons stirred. Then the water close at hand began to gurgle strangely and a soft breeze made mysterious whispers amid the foliage. The harsh cry of a night-bird broke the spell, and Mohave Mat cried:

"By Moses! I know that man!"

"Who is he?" eagerly asked Harry.

"Ther wuzt critter unbung," was the reply. "He is Black Vulture, chief o' the Desert Vampires, a miserable gang o' lan' pirates!"

This was startling information, indeed. The boys looked into each other's eyes with increasing alarm written on their faces. Aztec Jack had said he found no living human being within the borders of the Mystic Land, but the experience of the boys had been of quite a different nature, and it began to look as if they were yet to find enemies there—ruffians of the deepest dye.

"I'm goin' ter try ter foller thet critter," asserted the Mustang, grimly. "I don't reckon I kin overtake him, but ef I do—"

He did not finish the sentence, but hurried away into the darkness, not even pausing to bid the boys adieu.

When Mohave Mat had disappeared Phil Strong sprung to his feet, grasping his rifle, and saying in a low tone:

"And I am going to follow you, my giddy Mustang. There is more in this business than appears on the surface. I'll be back as soon as possible, pard. Keep eyes open for snags."

Then he glided into the darkness in the tracks of Mohave Mat.

Phil had not believed the story which the Mustang told of himself. For some reason he felt sure that the man was lying, and when Mat so suddenly decided to leave camp, he resolved to follow.

But the young treasure-seeker found that trailing in the dark is no easy thing. He was forced to depend on his ears more than his eyes, and as the man he was following was moving cautiously, he found the task doubly difficult. However, he succeeded remarkably well, for he followed the man a long distance toward the interior of the fertile section which surrounded the two mountains.

If he had been aided by the moon the youthful trailer would have made a great success of his attempt. But the moon had not risen, though he knew the time of its appearance could not be far distant.

At length Phil found that he was no longer following Mohave Mat. In some way he had lost the man in the darkness. But he resolved not to turn back just then. Already the moon was lighting up the eastern sky and she would soon be shedding her light around him. Slackening his pace somewhat, he kept on.

Soon the moon appeared and shed its white light around the lone youth. He was about to turn his steps toward the place where he believed the lake to be located and try to obtain a view of the little sheet of water by moonlight when he fancied he heard voices and the sound of approaching horses. Listening closely, he became satisfied it was not fancy.

Some one was approaching.

When he made this discovery Phil was standing in an open glade that was partially lighted by the moon. Something told him the night riders would pass through that glade.

"If I want a look at them I'd better get to cover right here," he muttered. "It is probably Black Vulture's gang of outlaws if Mohave Mat spoke the truth when he said that man was the chief of the Desert Vampires. I have heard of the gang many times, but never yet have I seen one of them."

The sounds continued to approach and Phil hastily secreted himself so that he could command a view of the glade. A few moments later the horsemen rode into the opening. The hidden youth gave a gasp of surprise as he recognized two of the leaders as belonging to the party of Mexicans led by the Spaniard, Don Mendoza. During the time he had been with the band he had examined every face so closely that he was confident he would know any one of them if they ever met.

But the following moment a cry of amazement broke from the lips of the concealed lad. Close behind the two Mexicans rode Luis Servedo and a beautiful girl. Luis was bound upon his handsome black horse and his hands were confined behind him. The girl was not bound, but both she and Luis were closely guarded by men who rode on every side of them.

The horsemen heard Phil's cry of amazement, and those in advanced drew rein, glancing around in alarm or surprise. Seeing he was discovered, the impetuous youth drew back the hammer of his rifle and flung the weapon to his shoulder. The next instant he touched the trigger, a spout of red flame leaped from the mouth of the weapon and a ringing report followed!

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE MAID OF THE LAKE.

"BEGORRA!" exclaimed Barney Brady, as Phil vanished in the darkness; "thit Phillup is taken with a spheer av some sort, Oi belave. It's afther gittin' hisself inther trouble he will be if he's not mighty keeful how he folls thit gentlemon av the iron grip."

Harry said nothing, but looked uneasily toward the spot where Phil was last seen. He was tempted to call to the hasty youth, but checked the impulse, knowing it would be useless if Phil had set his mind on following their late visitor.

"Whut d'yees think av it, Harry, me b'y?" the Irish lad finally asked.

"Think of what, Barney?"

"Av the things we hiv seen with the foor eyes av us. Is this the place where theer was t' be nobody at all, at all? Is this the place where we was t' foind all the goold we wanted?"

"There is no doubt but this is the Mystic Land of which Aztec Jack told so much, but others have discovered it since he was here and may make us trouble. I should not be at all surprised if it developed that the Desert Vampires had their retreat here. I should say it would make an excellent place for them, for who would pursue them across the desert into this unknown section? This part of the Territory is but little known and has never been fully explored."

"Who are the Disert Vampoors, Harry? It's Barney Brady as niver knew a thing about them."

"They are without doubt the wretches who murdered the parents of Luis Servedo. Whether Don Mendoza had any hand in that dastardly piece of work or not I cannot say, but the Don is a villain through and through. It hardly seems he could have been inhuman enough to have had a hand in the death of his own sister, though it may be that the outlaws were not to harm Senora Servedo. According to Luis's story, her death was caused by the dagger intended for her husband. He said that Black Vulture, who is chief of the Desert Vampires, was the leader of the party who attacked the hacienda."

"An' Auld Harrudgrip said thit mon as was lookin' at us fram the bushes theer was Black Vulture."

"He did, but I cannot understand how he knew, for it is said that no man has yet seen the outlaw chief in his right character to know him by the looks of his face. The man continually goes masked or disguised, it is said. The last I knew of him he was down on the Gila with his

entire band. He jumps swiftly from place to place and thus baffles pursuit."

For a long time the two boys lay on the ground talking and listening for the returning footsteps of their absent comrade. They little dreamed how much time would expire before they looked on Phil's face again.

It was shortly after moonrise that they both heard the sound of a distant rifle-shot. They started up and heard the sound repeated almost immediately. Then a strangely oppressive silence seemed to settle over the Mystic Land.

What had happened?

"Phil has fallen into trouble," asserted Harry, decidedly. "I feel sure of it."

"Oi believe ye are roight, Harry."

"We must try to find him, Barney. Perhaps he has been murdered. Put out the fire entirely while I am looking after the horses. Then we will strike out."

In a short time the two lads were making their way cautiously in the direction which they believed would lead them near the spot where the rifle had been discharged, Harry taking the lead and the Irish youth following close at his heels. Like two uncanny shadows they crept along, taking pains to avoid the recoult openings.

It happened that they passed close to the glade where Phil had fired on the mounted men, but did not enter it. Had they done so, they would have discovered something of interest, for the light of the moon showed two dark bodies lying rigid and motionless near the center of the opening.

Finally, Harry bore off to the right, and it was not long before the boys found themselves looking down into a little basin where lay the tiny lake of the Mystic Land, shimmering like pure silver in the white moonlight. It was a delightful scene, and for a time the two lads forgot themselves as they silently admired a prospect which only the pen of Nature's master poet could have described.

"Och, now, but isn't it a jewil, Harry, lad!" softly exclaimed the enthused Barney. "Oi niver saw the loikes av it before, fer it bates the duck-pond bark av me feyther's illigant wan-story shanty in auld Oireland. Oi'd be willin' t' die fer wan look at this bit av warther by the loight av the moon if Oi could only come bark t' loife ag'in when Oi wanted t' take anither look."

"Hush!" cautioned Harry, pointing away over the lake. "What is that?"

Out of the shadows had darted a dark object, that came skimming swiftly across the smooth, silvery surface of the water. A close scrutiny served to show the boys that it was a canoe containing two figures.

"Get back, Barney," whispered Harry. "Crouch low down. Don't let them see you."

Concealed by the shadows the lads watched the canoe swiftly approach, feeling great curiosity to know who its occupants were. They soon made a surprising discovery.

"Injins!" gasped the Irish boy. "Injins, be the Howly Vargin!"

Barney was right; the two figures in the canoe were Indian warriors in all the glory of feathered head-dress and war-paint. Silently they plied their paddles, and the light craft shot through the water without making scarcely so much as a ripple.

"Yes, they are Indians," said Harry, in a cautious whisper. "Have a care they do not see you, for we desire no encounter with the red dogs."

A short distance from the boys was a small cove, out of which flowed the stream which Aztec Jack had called Lost River. Around the cove the trees were quite tall, filling the place with shadows. Toward this the Indians sent the canoe, and soon vanished in the darkness of the place.

"They are gone, thank the blissed S'ints!" came from the Irish lad's lips, "with a sigh of relief."

"Don't be so sure of that," said the cautious Harry. "Keep quiet till it is a sure thing they have departed, for I fancy I know those bucks by sight. If I am not mistaken, I was obliged to shoot a friend of theirs in order to prevent him from shooting Aztec Jack."

"Howly Mither! Ye don't mane ter say thim rid naygers are the ones who sthole the crazy galute's horrus?"

"I think they are."

"An' they hiv follered yer heur! Worra worra! Harry, b'y, it's yer hair they are afther."

"I reckon you are right."

"The darty haythen! Yees will be afther hivin' t' sarve thim as ye did theer parthner. If yees don't, they may crape in on ye whin ye l'aste expict it."

"You are right. If I find they are following me, I shall not hesitate to shoot them both, for it will be their lives or mine."

"A cl'ane case av silf-defence. It's Barney Brady as is redy ter help dispose av one av thim, so lit's stay roight heur an' watch fer thim t' coome bark. If ye are sure they are the wans ye think, jist say the worrud an' we will salt thim so thit if they fall inther the lake it will taste loike the say."

"We will remain here for a time, but I shall hardly feel like shooting even a savage down in cold blood. I could not bear to see them fall dead before my eyes, and know my hand did the bloody work."

"Well, if ye can't bear t' say it, jist shoot yer eyes whin ye pulls the trigger, thin ye won't hiv t' say innuthing at all, at all."

"Ha! Isn't that another canoe?"

Harry pointed away across the lake, and, looking in the direction indicated, Barney replied:

"Sure as shootin'!"

It was with feelings of amazement that the two boys watched the second canoe approach. It was snowy white and its single occupant was dressed in garments of white.

And the occupant of the canoe was a girl!

This the hidden boys discovered as the strange craft approached, moving over the water with a silence that was awe-inspiring. Deftly the unknown maiden plied the paddle, making no sound that could be heard by the lads on the shore.

"Howly S'int!" breathed Barney. "Is it a spook, Oi dunno?"

"No," replied Harry, excitedly: "but by heavens! I believe that is the very girl I saw mounted on the white horse that flew past the spring where I camped the night I spent alone on the Painted Desert! By Jove! I am sure of it!"

The moonlight fell fairly upon the face of the beautiful maiden in the white canoe and Harry stared at it like one fascinated, not heeding the danger into which the maiden of the lake was moving.

Suddenly the white canoe and its mysterious occupant disappeared into the darkness of the little cove at the head of Lost River. Ten seconds later a sharp feminine cry of terror and distress came from the black shadows!

CHAPTER XIX.

AZTEC JACK ON HAND.

As that sharp cry of distress came out of the deep shadows of the little cove, Harry and Barney leaped to their feet. Again they heard the cry—that of a female in terrible trouble—a sound to arouse the heroic emotions of a brave man—a sound that would lead many a man to face danger and death that he might aid the one in trouble.

"Swate Vargin!" cried the Irish lad. "The rid sarpen'ts hiv sazed her!"

Harry did not speak, but began swiftly descending from the little cliff, determined to reach the cove and aid the unfortunate maiden if possible. Barney followed close at his heels.

But barely had they reached the shore of the lake when a canoe shot out of the shadows and went skimming away over the placid bosom of the little sheet of silvery water. One glance showed them that the canoe contained three occupants—two Indians and the white girl, the latter being held fast in the arms of one brawny warrior.

"Theer they go, Harry, b'ly!" excitedly exclaimed Barney, pointing toward the fleeing canoe, which was sent swiftly along by the paddle handled by one of the muscular red-men. "Be jabers! they hiv farrust holt av the girrl."

The captured maiden heard the Irish lad's voice and saw the two figures on the shore. In a moment she cried:

"Help, help! Save me from these demons!"

The appeal seemed to pierce Harry Denton's heart like a keen knife. In an instant his rifle leaped to his shoulder, the muzzle covering one of the red-skins, and he shouted:

"Stop, you red fiends! Bring that girl back or I will send a bullet through you both!"

The savages made no reply, but one of them held the captive maiden in such a position that her body partially shielded both of her red captors, making it almost an impossibility for Harry to shoot either of them without hitting her.

"Oh, the devils!" groaned the excited youth. "I wish we had shot them both when they first came across the lake! The inhuman fiends!"

And in his rage and despair Harry Denton said some things which would not look well in print. He was a boy who never swore, but he came dangerously near it then.

"Kape cool, Harry, lad," advised Barney, who was the calmer of the two just then. "We will git a whack at thim yit, an' whin we do, begorra! we will make up fer the fu'st toime we fooled away."

"But they are carrying off that beautiful girl and we are forced to stand idly by and see them do so. That is what makes my blood boil. It seems I must aid her in some way!"

"Ye're bard hit by they poorthy face av her, but Oi am not surprised at all, at all. She is as swate as a pache, so she is. If it wasn't for the little girrl bark at the hashthunder it's yer rival Oi'd be, Harry."

"Oh, cease such foolish talk! This is no time for it! How are we to rescue that poor girl?"

"Will ye ax me soomethin' aisy?"

"But she *shall* be rescued! If we were only

on that other shore we could give them a warm reception when they land."

"Bard luck t' it, we are not theer!"

"And the red fiends will be gone by the time we can get round there."

"Thin whut shall we do?"

"We will go round the lake. We cannot hope to get there in time to save her, but fortune may favor us in some way. Come on."

He started with Barney close at his heels and almost ran along the shore, resolved to keep within sight of the canoe till it reached the shore so that he could tell exactly at what point the red-skins landed with their captive. But in less than a minute after the canoe reached the shore the clear report of a rifle came ringing over the moonlit bosom of the little sheet of water, closely followed by the death wail of an Indian!

"What does that mean?" cried Harry, in amazement.

"Oi dunno," replied Barney; "but it stbrikes me thit wan av thim rid craythers has run ag'in' his larrust fit av sickness."

"You must be right; but who fired that shot?"

"Begorra! if Oi shoold tell yees Oi'd lole, fer Oi don't know meself."

"It may have been Phil."

"Yis, an' it may hiv bin sam wan ilse. Theer are plinty av pable round this deserted country. Niver before did Oi say the place where theer was no wan at all thit so many pable could be found."

"Aztec Jack gave the place a very good name when he called it the Mystic Land, for mystery seems to abound here. But who that strange girl can be is one of the greatest mysteries."

"It is wan we will be afther solvin' before shortly, Oi am thinkin'. We may foind her over theer."

"I hope so, but something tells me we shall not. All the same, we will go round. We may find something of interest."

They were soon forced to leave the immediate shore of the lake where the trees grew thickly and were loaded with vines, but they kept as near the water as they could, being able to catch a glimpse of its moonlit surface now and then. In this manner they hurried on as swiftly as possible, taking care to cease talking entirely and make very little noise as they approached the place where they believed the Indians had landed with their captive.

"Halt thar!"

The command came out of the darkness of the shadows, accompanied by the ominous clicking of a rifle as it was cocked. The boys stopped with gasps of dismay.

"The S'int's presarve us!" Barney hoarsely breathed.

"Down!" whispered Harry, and they sunk silently to the ground.

A forbidding silence seemed to fall around them—a silence only broken by the monotonous and steady droning often heard at night in a semi-tropical forest. Just then it did not seem that there was even a breath of a breeze to cause a rustle, yet after a few moments the listening lads fancied they heard a score of creeping cat-like feet all around them. Here and there on every side they seemed to hear the cautious, snakish sounds, and a chill crept over them as they listened.

"Be hivens, we're surroundid!" whispered Barney.

Harry made no reply, for he was inclined to believe that imagination was responsible for many of the cautious sounds they seemed to hear, but he knew there was at least one person in the immediate vicinity, for he had heard that person speak. But why did not the unknown speak again?

Slowly the moments dragged away, still nothing but the mysterious nocturnal sounds were to be heard. Finally Harry could endure the suspense no longer, and so he called:

"Who is there?"

"Ther same ter yerself," came back promptly from the black shadows. "Speak up an' fling us yer handle. I hev no objections ter swappin' cognomens, but I've got ter know yourn fu'st. Spit her out."

"By gracious!" cried Harry, leaping to his feet with a long breath of relief; "it is Aztec Jack!"

"Who is thet as knows my handle?" demanded the unseen man. "Is it—kin it be you, leetle pard?"

"Yes, it is I—Harry Denton."

"Ho, ho!" exclaimed the man as he advanced from the shadows. "This are lucky, by smokel! Didn't spect ter hit you hyer jist yit, boy, but you seem ter be on han' like er thumb. Gi'n us a wag o' yer paw."

The two met in the moonlight and clasped hands, while Barney Brady muttered:

"Oi'd jist abaout as lief sane a goost! It's in l'ague with the Auld B'y thit crayther is, an' Oi know it."

"It is pleasant ter see ye, lad," Aztec Jack declared, as he gave Harry's fingers a warm pressure. "I can't tell jist how I came ter leave ye, but we were separated in some way, that is plain."

"You fell in a fit; do you remember?"

"No, I don't, lad; but I will take your word for it. Blamed ef I can remember a thing o' ther kind. Ther last I reckerlect we wuz settin' by ther fire. I s'posed I must 'a' fell asleep. Ther next I knew I foun' merself alone on ther plain with White Cloud kerryin' me along. It wuz not fur from mornin' then."

"You wandered away in a fit, although I left you alone but a short time. I heard my friends and hastened to make my presence known, leaving you lying in an unconscious state by the fire. When I returned you were gone."

"Thet's gittin' ter be a common trick o' mine. Waal, I wuz kinder dazed fer a time arter I kem roun', but I struck right out fer this year lan' o' mystery, calkerlatin' I'd fine ye hyer arter awhile. I knew ye w'dn't be apt ter miss ther place ef ye hed ther grit ter push inter the Black Desert. But who's this with ye?"

"That is Barney Brady, one of the friends of whom I told you."

"Yer friends are hyer with ye?"

"Yes."

"Are they clean grit?"

"They are."

"Good! If they hev ther sand ter fight fer a sheer o' ther lost treasure they may git it, but thar is goin' ter be hot times in these year parts. White devils an' red ones are thick."

"You are right. Two of the latter captured a beautiful girl a short time ago and brought her across the lake in a canoe."

"I saw 'em, lad, I saw 'em," nodded Aztec Jack. "Bout ther time they got ashore I pumped er led pill inter one o' 'em. T'other drapped the gal an' slid like he wuz called fer. Gal run too. Didn't git a squar' look at her."

"Did you try to follow her?" eagerly asked Harry.

"Nary. She went off like a bullet. I let her go an' looked arter ther copper-skin I hed salted. Blamed ef it wuzn't one o' then p'isen Utes as stole my boss! Reckon they wuz arter you an' I, leetle pard; but one o' them'll never foller us no furdur. He hes gone bareheaded ter ther happy huntin'-groun's," and the Desert Nomad significantly tapped a ghastly object that hung from his belt.

"What is it?" asked the boy.

"Theer skelp o' ther p'izen varmint," was the reply.

CHAPTER XX.

THE MUTTERINGS OF A MADMAN.

INVOLUNTARILY Harry Denton recoiled a step, a look of repulsion on his face, as Aztec Jack turned so that the moonlight fell fairly on the gory scalp that dangled from his belt.

"Throw it away, Jack!" cried the boy.

"Don't ye like the look o' it, leetle pard? Waal, I don't wonder a tall. 'Tain't a pleasant thing ter look at, but I c'u'dn't help fixin' ther red imp ther way he w'd me ef I'd bin in his place."

"But why should you keep it? Throw it away!"

"All right, Harry, lad; hyer she goes."

Removing the gory trophy from his belt he flung it into the bushes, greatly to the relief of both lads.

"Now, boy, which are ye strikin'?" asked the old Treasure-Seeker.

Harry explained that they had been searching for their absent friend, but had found no trace of him. As the girl was free from the clutches of her savage captors, it seemed best they should return to the camp beside Lost River. They might find Phil there, as it was possible he had returned while they were absent. Unless he had fallen into trouble of some kind which would prevent, he would certainly return to the camp sooner or later. If he failed to return, there was little chance of their finding out what had happened to him until they were able to prosecute their search by daylight.

They discussed the situation a short time and decided to confiscate the canoe which had been used by the Ute warriors and cross the lake in it. Jack led them back to the canoe.

Both Barney and Harry felt a shiver of horror pass over them as they saw the lifeless body of the Indian whom Jack had shot. The dead savage was lying face downward on the ground and the moonlight fell fairly on his gory head.

"Howly S'int Patherick!" gasped Barney. "It is sick the soight av it makes me!"

They hurried on and entered the canoe. Aztec Jack took the paddle and pushed off from the shore. He soon showed his companions that he knew how to handle the blade in a skillful manner, for he sent the light craft skimming swiftly over the bosom of the lake. For a short time the lads forgot the exciting events which had recently occurred, for they were enraptured by the beauty of the scene around them. Almost before they were aware of it Jack's strong arms had sent the canoe across the lake and they were within the shadows of the little cove at the head of Lost River.

"Hyere we are, lads," announced the old man, as the prow of the canoe lightly touched the shore.

When they had disembarked he took care to

conceal the craft beneath some overhanging bushes, then he expressed a willingness to follow them to the place where they had camped. Harry led the way down the stream.

In a short time they reached the camp, but there they made an unpleasant discovery.

The horses were gone.

"Gone!" cried Harry, in dismay, "gone, trappings and all! They have been stolen."

"No doubt o' it, lad," nodded Aztec Jack. "Some o' ther p'isen varmints as seem ter infest this place—red or white—hev scooped 'em in."

"But what's to be done?"

"Not er thing tell we hev some light. We can't foller them ter-night."

Harry gave a groan of dismay.

"Bard cess t' ther luck!" cried Barney. "If we iver git out av this haythen counthry it will be afther we are did and hurried!"

"Where is your horse, Jack?"

"Oh, he is all right. I left him safe in a little pocket, an' I pity ther critter, red or white, as tries ter git er way with him. He will kick the life out o' them."

"Well," observed Harry, grimly, "we seem to be in a peck of trouble. It is plain that Phil has not returned, and I fear he will not. This is a land of death as well as mystery."

Aztec Jack leaned on his rifle, a grave look on his white face. He seemed to be thinking deeply. At length he looked up, saying:

"I opine ther onery gang o' white varmints as has ther camp somewhar hyer are ther ones as hev captered yer critters. If I hain't mis'oken, ther gang is that o' ole Black Vulture, ther wu'st cut-throat an' desperado as ever cursed Arizony. His followers are part criminals from ther States, an' part Mexican brigands with a price on ther heads. They must 'a' foun' this place sence I wuz hyer afore, fer they wuzn't hyer then. I didn't find nary livin' human in this section, but jest now they are thick ez flies."

"An' troublesome as hornits," put in Barney.

"Yes, they are goin' ter guv us heaps o' trouble. But I shell not hesitate ter wipe out enny critter, regardless o' color, that tries ter butt erg'n' me. I hev come fer some o' ther lost treasure o' ther Burried City, an' I am not goin' back empty-handed. Once I started with ernough ter make enny man rich, but my boss played out, an' I kem mighty nigh dyin' in ther desert. Reckon I'll hev better luck this time."

"But now, lads, we must select a place ter camp fer ther night. We'd best stop somewhar in this vicinity, fer we will be clost on han' ter take up ther trail o' ther stolen critters at ther fu'st peep o' day."

"Let me see if our blankets have been stolen," said Harry. "They were removed to the spot where we built the fire and may not have been found by the rascals."

To the delight of both lads, the blankets were found where they had left them when they started out to look for Phil. With them in their possession, they moved to a safe distance from the spot where they had first camped and selected a new locality. Their tarpaulin had been stolen with the rest of their trappings, but, as the weather was fine, they did not need its protection.

The duty of standing guard the first portion of the night fell upon Harry, and, as his companions rolled themselves in the blankets, his lonely vigil began. Barney was fast asleep in less than a minute, but the white-haired man seemed restless and uncomfortable.

From his position Harry could see the barren mountain that had once been a volcano rising close at hand, the rugged rocks on its timberless side seeming to stand out with unusual distinctness in the clear moonlight. He wondered if it would ever break out again and flood the beautiful country around its base with destruction, or was it forever dead. Even as these thoughts passed through his mind he fancied a faint muttering came from the slumbering giant and the ground quivered the least bit beneath his feet. He gave a start of alarm and gazed fixedly at the dead volcano, half-expecting to see it belch forth fire and lava, but it slept peacefully in the soft moonlight.

"I must have dropped half-asleep as I stood gazing at it," he thought, "and the muttering and faint tremble I felt were in a dream. There is no danger that old crater will ever vomit fire again."

Close at hand Aztec Jack tossed and muttered, and Harry fell to listening to his words, incoherent at first but gradually growing more distinct.

"Gold—yellow gold—all mine!" came from the lips of the restless sleeper. "I love it—I hate it! Gold—curse of men! Gold—my ruin! It glitters—gleams—bright gold—dead yellow gold! It lures me on—on to doom!"

The listening boy shuddered. There was something blood-chilling about the hoarsely muttered words of the sleeper, whose ghastly white face and snowy beard were touched by a spot of moonlight that crept through the foliage above him. For a time he was silent, then he began to mutter again:

"The Burried City—it is full of gold! I found it—the old Aztec city. The volcano covered it—ah!—covered it! I found the gold! Ha, ha!—a bagfull, a bagfull! All mine! On, good

horse—on, on! What, lame? Great God! must I die here in the desert with all this gold? Water, water! My throat is parched—brain on fire! Back, you dancing devils! What's that—water? A lake—a lake! Ah-a-a! One drink, one swallow—a drop!—all my gold for a drop! It is gone—gone! Gods—is this death?"

In his dreams the man was living over once more the terrible scenes of the desert. His broken sentences brought the strange story vividly to the mind of the listening lad. Fascinated by the horror pictured by the sleeper's words, Harry continued to listen, suppressing his breathing as if fearful it would disturb the strange man.

"No, Amos, Russel, I cannot play to-night," came from the lips of the sleeper, his mind apparently turning to other scenes. "I cannot play, Rus, old boy. You know—you know Dora—my wife—and little Dot are waiting at home. Must hurry—they'll be watching for me. What—one game? You won my money last time, Rus. Revenge? I have no grudge. Win the money back? Well—I will play an hour—only an hour. Then I must go home to Dora and little Dot."

Harry bent forward, listening eagerly to catch every word, feeling the man was speaking of the dead and buried past—the time in his life at which his ruin was wrought. Once more Jack went on:

"Wine, boys? I seldom drink. No, I am not afraid Dora will detect it in my breath. Well—if you insist—a very little. Ha! ha! I'm in luck to-night! That pot is mine—a big one, by Jove! Amos, you look blue. A little wine. Yes, drink with me. Oh-o! boys, I shall clean you out if this keeps on! But I must go to Dora and Dot soon. It is time now. Another glass, thanks. By Jove! I'm sleepy—sleepy. Believe the stuff is going to my head. My money again! Heavens! how sleepy! I can't—play—longer—"

Once more the man ceased to speak, and for a full minute he lay breathing heavily and moaning in a low, pitiful manner that touched the heart of the listening lad. Suddenly he demanded:

"Where am I? Dora—no, not home! This place is strange. What are those cries? My brain is clouded—reels. Hear those curses! What's that? Some one thumping—come in! Bars at the door! What can it mean? Am I in prison? No, no! But those cries. How weak—can scarcely walk! See those horrid faces—those glaring eyes—skinny arms—claw-like fingers! Hear those cries. They are mad—mad I know! And I—I am in a mad-house! How came I here? God of Heaven! am I mad? No, no, no! Let me out—let me out, I say! I will go to my wife and child! Back, devils!—dare to touch me and I will strike you dead at my feet! Curse, ye demons!—rave and howl! You cannot escape—I cannot escape! Oh, God above! I am mad—mad at last!"

With those terrible words the man started up, wildly outflinging his arms, then fell back. It seemed that he must be awake, but when the horrified boy leaned forward and peered into that sunken, corpse-like face, he saw that Jack still slept.

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed the dreamer. "Now I am free! I have outwitted them all—the fiends! Now back to Dora—Dora, my darling, and little Dot. They will be waiting for me—how they will laugh to see me coming home! Oh, hurry, hurry! Is that the cottage? Yes; there it stands—but how lonely it seems! Where is Dora? She used to meet me at the gate with Dot in her arms. Door fastened—house empty—gone! What's that you say—dead!—my Dora dead? It is false! Is this her grave—her name on the white stone? I cannot see it—all is growing dark. Dead and buried—oh, merciful Father! I have nothing to live for now! Let me die on her grave!"

The wind moaned softly through the foliage, and the spots of light and shadow played fitfully over the ghastly features. The man's hands were tightly clinched and his limbs thrown into a cramped position.

"Dot—little Dot," he sighed, "where is she? What—Amos Winwood? He was here—he told Dora I was dead? The liar! He loved her before we were married—she rejected him for me. He pretended to be my friend, the treacherous dog! I see it all now—he threw me into the mad-house—told her I was dead—hoped to steal her from me! She died! Dot—what—he took my little Dot with him? I will find him! He shall give up my child! Now I will live—live for vengeance!"

CHAPTER XXI.

BRAVE PHIL AND LITTLE ANITA.

WITH the crack of Phil Strong's rifle the horse bestrode by one of the Mexicans dropped to the ground as if struck by an electric shock. Agile though he was, the man was nearly caught beneath the falling animal.

Almost before the startled horsemen could realize what had occurred, the hidden youth fired again, and another horse went down. It was not his purpose to take human life if he could aid the captives in any other manner.

With the second shot the horse ridden by the captive maiden became unmanageable, and, wheeling sharply to one side, plunged into the bushes before a hand could prevent. Believing they were attacked by a considerable force of armed men, who had the advantage of being concealed by the shadows, the entire party of horsemen turned quickly and dashed into the cover of the underbrush. Phil waited for nothing more, but bounded swiftly away in pursuit of the flying horse which bore the beautiful girl on its back.

"It must be Luis Servedo's sister," thought the reckless youth, as he dashed on, hearing the horse galloping through the brush ahead. "That frightened animal may throw her. I will do my best to overtake her; Luis must look out for himself now. It would have been folly for me to have followed that gang."

He soon found the frightened horse was gaining on him, and in a short time it had passed almost beyond his hearing, still he pressed forward, keeping his eyes about him, for he more than half-expected to see the form on the ground, swept from the steed by the branches. But nothing of the kind happened, the maiden being a better horsewoman than he knew.

Phil little thought how far he had traveled when at length he heard the stamping of a horse just ahead, followed by a few low words in a feminine voice, plainly addressed to the animal. His heart gave a leap of satisfaction and he crept silently on till he reached a point where he could peer into a moonlit opening. Then he discovered he had surely overtaken the beautiful maiden, for she was standing close beside the large black steed, her head bowed in a listening attitude. A breath of admiration parted his lips as he saw her standing thus in the white moonlight.

"Heavens!" he mentally exclaimed. "She is the fairest creature I ever saw! That picture is enough to set a romantic poet wild with rapture."

He made not a sound, but it almost seemed that she heard him there, for she looked up suddenly with a light of terror in her large midnight eyes, her attitude reminding him of a startled fawn. With a sudden impulse, he stepped out into the moonlight, saying quietly:

"Senorita, I am a friend."

For a moment it seemed she would surely fly from him, but when he remained standing in full view without attempting to approach nearer, she turned toward him, saying something in Spanish.

"I am a friend," repeated Phil. "I am the one who fired on your captors a short time ago. I understand but little Spanish."

She looked at him earnestly as if to make sure he spoke the truth, then she held out her hand, saying, with a delightful little accent:

"You speak no Spanish, but I speak English you see. You say you shoot the horses. I cannot tell; I saw no one. You would not deceive me? You are not a foe of me?"

"I am your friend," declared the impulsive lad—"your friend at all times, through fire or flood! You may trust me with your life!"

She looked a bit surprised at his earnest words and a flush of color tinged her cheeks. But the warm Spanish blood ran freely in her veins, and, seeing the frank-spoken youth was in sober earnest, she muttered a single word as she allowed him to clasp her hand:

"*Bienheor!*"

Phil understood enough Spanish to know she had called him her benefactor, and, stooping swiftly, he touched his lips to her hand quite as gallantly as any knight of the olden time could have done. She withdrew the soft hand as soon as his clinging fingers relaxed a little, and he fancied she shrunk back a bit.

"You need have no fear of me," he hastened to say. "If you are Anita Servedo, I am your brother's friend as well as yours. Trust me."

"My brother!" she cried, her hand falling on his arm. "What of him? Did he escape?"

"I fear not. The ruffians bore him into the bushes, for he was lashed to the back of his horse. He must still be in their power."

"*Santa Maria!* They will murder him!"

"I trust not. He may yet find an opportunity to escape. Or my friends or myself may be able to rescue him."

"You must be Senor Philip. He speak to me of you. He like you well. He has told you of our wicked uncle? Oh, the bad man! He did so persecute me while Luis was from me! Him I do hate!"

"Yes he told me, but he did not believe it could be true that Don Mendoza misused you and tried to force you to wed a man you do not like."

"He did, he did! It is all true! He even fasten me in my room and *starve* me; but I would surely die before I would be anything to that wretch of man! He is bad, bad, bad!—worse than Don Mendoza! Chief of the *ladrones* he must be—the Black Vulture!"

"Was he with your captors?"

"He might have been, but so concealed I did not know. They did capture and carry me away, but when the big desert was reached I did escape on my horse. On the plain he did become frightened and carried me away into the

darkness I knew not where to. In fear I cry for help and hear some one pursue. I did not know if friend or foe, but it prove to be my dear brother. He say he have friends near, but we could not find them. We turn to the south, but bad men find and take us prisoners—the same who carried me away. They bring us here across the great desert."

Anita's English was not nearly as good as her brother's, but her story was plain enough for Phil to understand it fully, and her strange manner of speaking quite charmed him. When she talked her dark eyes seemed to express fully as much as the words she uttered.

"Well," came decidedly from Phil's lips when he had listened to her story, "those dastardly dogs shall never lay the weight of a finger on you again if I can prevent. My friends are not very far away. Will you go with me to them?"

"Si, senior."

He assisted her to mount and then they moved away in the direction which he believed would take them to Harry and Barney. But for once in his life Phil made a big mistake, taking a course that led him away to the northwest almost directly from the ones he would find.

For at least an hour they moved forward, only speaking occasionally in low tones, and then, when they had nearly completed half the circuit of the fertile section around the two mountains, the youth began to understand they were astray. Frankly he told his fair companion of their misfortune.

"I almost doubt my ability to return to camp to-night," he confessed, feeling ashamed of his mistake. "By daylight I can find the place."

"Then shall we wait for the light?"

"If you are willing."

"I am. I am so tired scarce can I keep my eyes open. I would sleep, brave senior."

"Then we had better stop here in this little glade. It is sheltered from the cold night air."

He assisted her from the saddle and assured her that he would watch over her while she slept. With her great dark eyes fastened on his, she thanked him again and told him she would trust herself in his care. Never before had Phil heard words spoken by human lips which thrilled him like the few she softly murmured.

While he attended to the horse, she selected a spot carpeted by thick moss, and when he turned from the animal, she was lying there in the moonlight, having already fallen fast asleep. For a time he stood and watched from a distance, his blue eyes glowing with deepest admiration. She looked like a sleeping beauty, indeed.

Finally, he was seized by a desire to be nearer the sleeper, and he stole softly forward and sat down on the moss close to where she lay, his eyes still fixed upon her dusky, handsome face, from which the glorious light of the great dark eyes was hidden by the long, drooping lashes.

Her lips parted—a smile flitted over her face—she murmured faintly some words in Spanish. Eagerly Phil bent closer, feeling like an eavesdropper, yet chained there by his great desire to hear the pleasant, far-away murmur of her voice.

"Phillip!"

Faintly she whispered the name, but never had it sounded so sweet to the ears of the listening youth. His heart gave a great bound and his blood leaped to his face in a hot flush. For a moment he bent closer, then he whispered with sudden ardor:

"Anita—I would die for you, my little Spanish angel!"

It almost seemed that the sleeping girl heard the words, for she smiled again.

The sudden tramp of horses' feet and jingle of trappings caused the youth to leap to his feet and arouse Anita from her slumber. Horsemen were approaching!

Seizing the girl in his strong arms, Phil bore her swiftly to the horse and placed her on the animal's back, even before she was fully conscious of her surroundings. Then, as he released the steed, a party of horsemen broke into the glade. Anita recognized their leader, and almost screamed:

"Santa Maria! it is my uncle, Don Mendoza!"

CHAPTER XXII.

SHOT DOWN—LOOKING INTO DEAD VALLEY.

A CRY of amazement broke from the lips of the Spanish Don as his eyes fell upon the two figures revealed by the moonlight, and at a word of command from him the entire party of horsemen came to an abrupt halt.

"Alma mia Anita!" (My dear Anita) cried Don Mendoza.

But the girl threw up one hand with a gesture of fear and repulsion and waved him back, at the same time saying entreatingly to the youth at her side:

"Oh, senior! the bad, bad man! Do not let him touch me, salvador mio!"

It was a delightful thing to hear those sweet lips call him her preserver, and at that moment Philip Strong felt more than a match for the dark-faced Spaniard and his companions.

"I will protect you with my life, seniorita!" he declared, as he threw back the hammer of his Winchester and faced the desperate-appearing gang. "Back, you mongrel dogs! If you crowd me I will let the night air follow my bullets through your bodies!"

"Car-ramba!" came gratingly from the lips of the Spanish Don. "Demonis Gringo!"

The entire party uttered oaths and exclamations of hatred which filled the girl with terror. She clutched Phil's arm and cried excitedly:

"They would slay you, senior! Fly, fly!"

"And desert you? Not if I know myself! Don't worry, little one; one good Yankee is a match for twenty or thirty suchimps of Satan as those."

"Rendamos, Americano!" commanded Don Mendoza.

"Surrender—never!" retorted the youth, catching the meaning of the Spaniard's demand.

"I am not built of that kind of stuff."

"Then you die!" came hissing from the lips of the dark-faced man. "That girl we will have!"

"You will have to catch her before you get her," cried Phil, and wheeling with a sudden impulse, he struck Anita's horse a sharp blow and gave a loud shout. With a snort, the animal bounded away into the shadows, the girl clinging to its back.

Cries of fury broke from the horsemen as they witnessed this, and then, just as Phil faced them once more, a revolver flashed and the sharp report filled the little glade with echoes.

The rifle dropped from the brave lad's fingers and he sunk to the ground, without even uttering a groan. Shouts of triumph came from the witnesses of this dastardly shot and its result, then Don Mendoza gave the order to dash on in pursuit of the escaping girl, and the entire party swept past the motionless figure and plunged into the shadows beyond the limits of the opening.

Gradually the thunder of hoofs and sounds of pursuit died out in the distance. The white-faced moon looked down into the little glade of the Mystic Land and saw a sad sight. Outstretched upon the ground just as he fell, his face turned toward the sky and his hair matted with blood, lay the brave youth who had been stricken down by a shot from the hand of a dastard. Was he dead?

The night wind, sweet with the perfume of flowers, stole through the glade and softly touched the immobile features of the silent one. It lingered a moment to whisper softly, sadly amid the foliage, and then passed on, leaving the opening to the pale moonlight and unbroken silence.

It was at least two hours later that Barney Brady, who was standing guard over his sleeping companions, was startled to hear a soft footstep near at hand and see a figure step out of the shadows into the moonlight before him. One look at that form and ghastly blood-stained face did the little Irish lad take, then he gave utterance to a whoop of terror, stepped backward, caught his foot and fell sprawling to the ground.

Barney's shout brought Harry Denton and Aztec Jack to their feet, weapons in hand. Lying flat on his back, the Irish boy kicked up his heels and yelled:

"Murder an' blazes! it's the ghost av pore Phillip! Och hone! it's kilt intirely the pore b'y is! Niver—niver did Oi say the loikes av it! Worra, worra! Go 'way, Misher Ghost! Don't touch me! I niver done it! Luck at the blud all over the face av it! Hiven presave us!"

Harry and Jack gazed at the figure in wonder and saw that it was a human being in a sorry plight. Harry almost immediately recognized Phil Strong, despite the blood which covered the face of the latter.

"Phil," he cried in amazement, "is it you?"

"What there is left of me," was the reply.

"I am more dead than alive, but I am not finished by any means."

With these words the brave lad staggered forward a few steps and sunk exhausted to the ground. In a moment Harry was at his friend's side inquiring anxiously:

"How is it, Phil? Where are you hurt?"

"My head, little pard—got creased. Bullet grazed the skull and tumbled me over senseless. Had it passed an inch lower I would have passed in my chips. I have—bound it up—with handkerchief. Water?"

The wounded youth was in an almost fainting condition, but a drink of water revived him, and he laughed a little wildly as Harry washed the blood from his face. Aztec Jack came forward and examined the wound, pronouncing it a "close call," but not at all dangerous unless it had affected the youth's brain. At this Phil laughed again, and averred his brain was all right.

"Begorra!" said Barney, arising to his feet and rubbing his back with both hands. "If the bullet didn't give him concussion av the brain, this fall was rather givin' me concussion av the bark. Be me faith! Oi believe it is broke intirely. Oh, Phillip, whoy did ye nearly scare me t' dith? It would hiv bin a good thing fer me if ye'd completed the job, fer thin Oi'd escaped me misery at wance."

As soon as Phil's wound had been cared for,

he told his companions the story of his adventures, and great was their amazement and indignation. Don Mendoza and his satellites were called some very hard names, but it was thought a remarkable piece of good fortune that the ruffians had not paused to make sure of their work when they shot Phil down.

How long he had remained unconscious after being shot the youth did not know, but when he revived he discovered that he was quite alone just where he fell, and his rifle was by his side. After binding his handkerchief about his head to check the flow of blood, he started to find his friends, if possible. Fortune led him to them after some wandering.

"I shall search for Anita in the morning," declared the wounded youth. "She may have fallen into the hands of her dastardly uncle, but I hope not."

Of course the boys had some things to relate to Phil which surprised him not a little, and morning was not far away when they lay down and tried to get some sleep, leaving Jack as guard.

When they awoke they discovered that the sun had been up for some time and Aztec Jack was gone.

"He has started to find the horses, I will venture something," asserted Harry. "It is useless for us to think of following the trail—that is, unless you wish to, Phil?"

"I shall try to discover what has become of Anita Servedo before I do anything else," said Phil.

"Begorra! Phillip, me b'y, Oi believe ye are harrud bit. It's swate on the girrul ye must be," cried Barney.

Phil laughed somewhat sheepishly.

"I reckon we are all hit," he said. "Back at the hacienda you have the little peon girl, Barney, and the maid of the lake seems to have broken Harry all up. You can't say a word, boys."

"Be jabez, ye're roight! Heur's a new song t' the chune av 'Comin' thro' the Roie'."

"Three brave laddies found their lassies
Where they sought thim not;
But thim laddies wisht the lassies
Could be fashter caught

How is thit fer hoigh? If yees kin bate it, jist give it a bit av a troy."

One of the hind-quarters of the antelope which Harry had shot was hanging from the limb of a tree, and the boys proceeded to build a fire at once and cook the meat. Having satisfied their hunger, they started out with Phil leading to try and what had become of Anita Servedo. It must be confessed that within his heart Harry hoped to see something of the maid of the lake.

For more than two hours the boys wandered around, but failed to find a trace of the one they sought. Phil seemed as strong and well as ever, although he declared his head did not feel pleasant.

Finally they were joined by Aztec Jack who announced that their horses had been taken into Dead Valley between the two mountains.

"Ef we foller ther trail inter ther valley," he said, "we shell hev ter go roun' ther base o' ther mountain more'n three mile, but by doin' er leetle climbin' we kin go right up over thar an' git inter ther valley. Which way shell we go?"

The boys voted to take the climb. It proved a difficult one, but thirty minutes later they reached a place where they could look down into Dead Valley.

CHAPTER XXIII.

CASPER GOMEZ APPEARS AGAIN.

"THAR, lads," said Aztec Jack, waving his hand toward the barren valley at their feet, "thar lays Dead Valley, an beneath them thar heaps o' black earth is ther burried Aztec city an' its golden treasure."

It was a desolate scene they looked down upon, and they thought Jack had given the place an appropriate name when he called it Dead Valley. A black, barren hollow, almost devoid of vegetation, with huge, unshapely mounds of earth and great boulders strewn everywhere.

"Ther ole mountain vomited 'em out," the Treasure-Seeker explained. "A part o' thet black stuff ye kin see thet seems ter run down from ther skile o' ther mountain thar in great windin' tracks is ther hardened lava, or melted rock. It cooled in thet way. The hull bottom o' ther valley's full o' it, thet's why thar don't no more things grow thar."

"Begorra!" exclaimed Barney; "it must hiv bin wan mighty surprise partly fer the papies as lived heur whin the stoof kim down outhar thim."

"It was a fatal surprise party, that is plain," observed Harry. "Do you think the volcano will ever break forth again, Jack?"

"It may, lad, it may; no one kin tell."

"Something makes me feel sure it will. I fancied last night I heard a low muttering and felt the ground tremble beneath my feet."

"Howly Vargin! Let's git away from heur! Oi'd rayther be skelped by Ingins thin be burried t' dith beneath a lot av milted rocks. Oi'm afereed it's Auld Oireland Oi'll niver sit eyes on ag'in!"

"But how can you get into the Buried City, Jack?" asked Phil.

"That is one o' ther sing'ler things, boy. Looker 'way thar at ther base o' t'other mountain. Kin ye see thet black hole?"

"Yes."

"Waal, I dunno whut ever caused thet hole, but I reckon it must 'a' alwus bin thar. Anyhow it leads inter a black windin' passage an' thet passage goes down, down, twistin' an' turnin' till o' a suddint ye finds yerself in one o' ther ole temples o' ther ruined city. Ther temple is nigh ther base o' ther mountain I reckon, an' it must be thet ther passage wuz onct used by ther Aztecs fer suthin'. From ther temple thar are kivered passages leadin' off ter all parts o' ther city. Some o' 'em are bu'sted in by ther stuff as fell on 'em an' are blocked up. T'others can be follered all right. With ther light o' some torches I pritty nigh 'splored ther bull place. In ther center o' ther city I foun' another temple with an altar, but the roof hed bin open to ther sky and ther ashes, dirt, big boulders an' lava hed 'bout hafe filled the place. But thar I foun' gold, gold! Ever' thing wuz glitterin' with gold ornyments. I filled er bag with 'em. Thar wuz more left. I foun' er secret vault. It wuz full o' golden treasure. Ah-a! it is thar—yes it is! Gold, gold, gold!"

Gradually the old man had worked himself up to an alarming pitch of excitement, and Harry began to fear he would have another fit. Laying his hand on the strange man's arm, he said in a low tone:

"Jack."

"Gold—yellow gold! I found it!"

"Jack," Harry repeated.

"Whut, lad?"

"Where are the horses?"

"Horses? Oh, yes! We kem hyer ter look fer ther horses. Waal, they hain't in sight in ther valley, be they?"

"I cannot see them."

"Then it must be ther thieves tuck 'em inter ther hoel over thar. Boys, it are Black Vulture's outlaws as hev made this place ther retreat. Mebbe they hev foun' ther treasure o' ther Buried City. But I'll tear my sheer from ther wretches ef I hev to do it single-handed! Thet gold is mine by right o' diskivery, an' all ther demons below shell not cheat me out o' my sheer! I'm er desperit man."

"But they could not keep the horses in that dark place."

"They didn't take 'em in very fur, lad. Thar's plenty o' room ter keep 'em concealed thar fer er time."

"And they will be closely guarded. How are we to recover them?"

"Jest trust thet ter me, lad; I'll find er way. Ef they guard ther passage, they guard ther way ter ther Buried City, an' I'm goin' in thar or die! But fust we've got ter find out fer sure thet ther critters hev bin taken in thar."

"How are we to do it? If we descend into the valley we shall be seen from the opening over there."

"You fellers will hev ter trust it all ter me. I will 'splore ther place alone. You kin go back an' hunt fer ther gal. I will find ye somewhar soon ez I get at ther facts an' we will settle onter some plan o' action."

This suited Phil completely, and Harry submitted to the arrangement, although he felt that Jack was not to be depended on. His fits and wild spells might cause him to forget the boys entirely. There was only one thing which he seemed to remember above all others—the treasure of the Buried City.

The old man was watching Harry's face as these thoughts passed through the boy's mind, and it almost seemed that he understood them as well as if they had been expressed by words, for he said:

"I'll not fail ye, boy, so don't worry. Ther ole man'll keep all right fer er time, shore."

"I know you would not mean to fail us—but those bad spells—"

"Hain't goin' ter hev ernuther soon, I reckon. I'll kinder keep meself in check."

"But you may not be able to find us when you want to."

"Find ye—why, I kin find ye ennywhar. But ef ye say so, we'll set a place ter meet an' er time."

"I think it will be better. Suppose we meet at the spot where we camped last night?"

"Kirect. When?"

"At sunset."

"I'll be thar."

With this they parted, Jack warning them to look out for trouble as there was danger all around them. They watched the old man descend into Dead Valley, picking his way down the steep incline with the skill and agility of a youth.

"That is the strangest man I ever met," said Phil. "His face, set in the midst of that white hair and beard, with the sunken, yet fiery eyes peering out from beneath the shaggy brows and piercing one through and through, is enough to haunt a fellow's dreams."

"You are right," acknowledged Harry. "And if you had heard him muttering in his sleep as I did last night you would not wonder at his sin-

gular manner. Boys, that man has been the inmate of a mad-house, placed there by the perfidy of a supposed friend!"

The boys uttered exclamations of astonishment, and then Harry told what he had heard as he crouched by Aztec Jack's side in the silent hours of the night.

"Heavens!" cried Phil. "If those things actually occurred, I do not wonder that the man is what he is."

"Nor I," said Harry. "And let me tell 'you, boys, although he seems to have forgotten it, he has lately seen the very man who wrecked his life—the one he saw at the further side of the desert the night he had the fit and disappeared—the one whom we saw peering at us from the bushes last night. That is Aztec Jack's bitterest foe."

"If so, there may be blood spilled if they meet."

"I feel that there will be some terrible tragedy take place before we turn our backs to these mountains."

"It's Barney Brady as is afeerd we will niver turn our backs on him at all, at all," put in the Irish lad.

"Well, the best thing we can do now," observed Phil, "is to go back there and try to find something of Anita Servedo."

"Or the fair maid of the lake," laughed Harry.

"Begorra! Oi appear t' be lift out in the cold at prisent," sighed Barney.

The boys retraced their steps to the foot of the mountain, and again began the search which they had abandoned a short time before. Nearly an hour had been spent fruitlessly in wandering here and there, when they heard the tramp of an approaching horse.

"Quick—into the brush!" hissed Phil.

They reached cover none too soon, for an instant later a horseman appeared. The boys could scarcely repress cries of amazement when they saw him.

It was Casper Gomez, the *vaquero*!

The Mexican rode straight on, and soon the luxuriant foliage shut him from view.

"By gracious!" exclaimed Harry, guardedly, as the lads all emerged from their concealment. "That is singular! What is that fellow here for?"

"He has followed in the tracks of Don Mendoza," said Phil. "The hacienda must be almost completely deserted."

"But what is he here for?"

"That is to be discovered. You wish to search for your maid of the lake, but I am going to follow Casper Gomez. We will meet at sunset, if not before. *Adios* for the present." And before the boys could utter a word of protest he darted away in the wake of the Mexican.

Phil little thought how quickly the man he was following would lead him to the one he most desired to see, yet something seemed to tell him to keep as close to Casper's heels as he could without being detected. He found the task comparatively easy, the nature of the ground being to his advantage, but he finally became so careless that he was nearly detected when the Mexican stopped and suddenly looked back.

After his narrow escape the young trailer was more cautious, falling back so that Casper was out of sight the greater part of the time, only taking care not to lose him entirely.

Suddenly from directly ahead came a shrill feminine cry that caused the youth's heart to give a great bound. He knew the voice. It was Anita, and she was in trouble.

Bounding forward like a deer, Phil broke suddenly into an opening, near the center of which the fair girl he sought was struggling desperately in the clutches of Casper, the *vaquero*!

CHAPTER XXIV.

BARNEY'S FATE—HARRY'S FEARFUL FALL.

"Did yees iver say the loikes av thit now?" cried Barney Brady, as Phil Strong disappeared from view. "Thit Phillip will be afther gittin' hisself kilt intirely! Nixt toime he will be shot clane through the skull-pan or theerabouts, an' whin he's stuu did Oi think he'll be afther wishin' he had bin a bit more careful. Gard pity a mon whose brains be all in his heels!"

Harry looked perplexed and half-angry as he stared toward the spot where Phil's sturdy figure was last seen, plainly showing he was not pleased by the sudden move of his friend.

"It would have been well enough for him to have consulted us as to the advisability of chasing that Greaser," he said, leaning on his rifle. "I think it a piece of folly, for it is not at all probable that Casper Gomez knows where Anita Servedo is now. It is plain that the *vaquero* has lately come from the hacienda, probably with news of some kind for Don Mendoza. We had better kept together, for we may have to fight for our lives before we get away from the Mystic Land, and three can fight a third harder than two."

"Solid horrus since, Harry, me b'y! It's yerself as knows the hid av yees fram a hole in the ground. Phillip an' meself hiv bin parruds, but

begorra! Oi begin t' fale loike he was drappin' av me. It's you an' Oi, Harry, lad, as 'ill hev ter sweer by ache ither."

"I think you are right, Barney," and a faint smile came to Harry's face. "We must stick by each other through thick and thin."

"An' we'll do it, Harry. Be me faith! It's loike ye uncommonly well Oi do, b'y. Oi'm reddy ter starn'd by yees till Oi doie, if Oi don't git kilt before thit. Heur's me barnd on it."

The two boys clasped hands warmly, thus sealing the compact.

"An' now, Harry, which way is it?"

"To the lake."

"Av coorse. It's the girrul av the whoite canoe ye w'd be plazed t' sit eyes on."

A short time later they reached the little body of water that lay in a small basin at the very foot of the fertile mountain, and stood looking down at it from an overhanging cliff. It was a lovely scene as revealed by the bright sunlight—quite as pleasant as when seen by moonlight, although of a different sort of beauty. The lake was surrounded by green trees, from which hung flowering vines which filled the air with a delightful perfume. Gay-plumaged birds darted here and there, and at one place where the water was shallow, several bright red flamingoes were stalking slowly about in the most dignified manner possible for such long-legged and long-necked creatures. At the further side of the lake they saw, in a little opening, the graceful outlines of an antelope that had come down to the water to drink, and Barney was so enthused by the sight that it was with difficulty Harry prevented him from trying a shot at the unsuspecting creature.

"Ache, Harry, b'y!" whispered the Irish lad. "Whut a beauchy av a shot thit w'd be! Howly S'int! did yees iver say the loikes ov it?"

But suddenly the animal looked up and saw them, and the next instant it disappeared into the green shades of the timber, much to Barney's regret.

The lads threw themselves down on the cliff and lay feasting their eyes on the beauty of the scene.

"Arrh, Harry," cried Barney, enthusiastically, "a mon w'd like t' live feriver if he c'd only stay in sich a place as this! It's a second Gardeen av Eden it is t' be sure!"

They finally fell to gazing at the mountain so close at hand and speculating on the possibility of climbing its steep, wooded side. Hundreds of feet above they could see a wooded cliff, from which it seemed a fine view of the Mystic Land and surrounding desert could be obtained.

Finally, Barney arose and wandered away a short distance, leaving Harry still reclining on the ground, gazing up at the cliff.

Suddenly a wild whoop of triumph aroused the youth, and he leaped to his feet to see Barney Brady and an Indian warrior locked in deadly embrace, struggling desperately on the very verge of the cliff.

"Worro, ye rid divil!" cried the Irish lad. "So yees w'd joomp onther a felly from behoind, w'd yees! Will, it's Barney Brady as ye will foind not a bit av a slouch, Oi'm thinkin'. (I'm little, but oh my! Is it a snap at the barks ye are afther? Hurrol thit is me bist holt!"

Jerking out a revolver, Harry Denton darted toward the contestants, determined to aid his friend in some way. Barney saw him coming and shouted:

"Stan' off, Harry, lad, an' see the foon. Oi hiv a hard holt on the ole odamahoon now an' if Oi don't break the the bark av him—"

Barney's speech ended suddenly, for, clinging fast to his white foe, the Indian sprang over the cliff, uttering a yell of defiance. A loud splash followed and both of the combatants sunk from view beneath the surface of the lake.

Harry rushed forward and peered down from the cliff, waiting for them to rise. In a moment they came to the surface, puffing and struggling, churning the water into white foam.

"Begorra!" gurgled the little Irishman, "it's roight t' home Oi am now, ye rid nayger. Oi kin lick the stoofin' out av two av yees in the warther. Come on, ye dirty skoonk! Take thit in the jaw av yees, an' thit in the eye, an' say how ye loike the falin' av an Irish b'y's fist. Hurrol!"

Revolver ready cocked, Harry tried to get a shot at the red-skin, but the motions of the two were so rapid that he dared not fire for fear of hitting his friend.

"Get away, Barney!" he shouted. "Give me a chance and I will shoot that dog!"

"Git away, is it? Be jabez! he is sthuck t' me faster than glue! Oi'm afeerd thit—ug-r-r—"

The boy's words ended suddenly in a horrible choking sound and Harry saw a dusky hand fastened firmly on Barney's throat. The sight filled him with horror, for he knew the Indian was strangling the brave little Irish lad. With desperate recklessness, he lifted the revolver, took a quick aim at the warrior's head and pulled the trigger.

For a moment after the report a thin veil of smoke hid the figures in the water from Harry's sight, and when the soft breeze carried the white

smoke away, he found that both Indian and boy had sunk from view.

With wildly beating heart he waited for one or both to rise to the surface. Slowly the seconds slipped away, but the smooth surface of the water beneath the cliff remained unbroken. The greatest period of time that a human being could remain under water and live passed, still the watcher on the cliff saw nothing of the Indian or the boy.

"My God!" he groaned. "That is the end of poor Barney!"

Still, hoping against hope, he hung over the cliff with his eyes fastened on the water. The black shadow of the cliff prevented him from seeing into the depths. Ten—twenty minutes passed.

"Great heavens!" cried Harry. "To think the poor boy should die thus. That was the last of those three Ute warriors. I know not if my bullet reached him. It may be that I hit Barney instead. Well, we shall never see the true-hearted little Irish lad again."

He continued to watch the water even after he felt it was useless to do so, and the tears which ran silently down his cheeks were no disgrace to his manhood. Finally, he was forced to give up the watch, though he made a resolve to secure and bury the body of his friend.

"If Phil were only here now," he muttered.

Recovering his rifle, he lay down on the cliff, occasionally looking over to see if either body had risen to the surface. For an hour he remained there, then he resolved to go round the lake and secure the canoe which they had left at the head of Lost River the night before. With it he could run under the cliff and make a rigid search.

He was about to arise to his feet when, to his amazement he saw a canoe shoot out from the opposite shore, and come skimming swiftly over the lake. One glance showed him it was the same white canoe he had seen the night before!

But now it contained two occupants!

As the craft came nearer, the watching boy saw that one of its inmates was the same beautiful girl—the mysterious maid of the lake. The other was a man, and Harry fancied there was something familiar about his appearance. He soon discovered he had seen the man before.

It was the same strange unknown whom he believed to be the false friend and now deadly foe of Aztec Jack!

The man was handling the paddle, and he directed the canoe for the shore quite near the cliff where the boy lay. Harry was careful to keep himself concealed, but remained where he could closely watch the white canoe and its occupants.

"So those two persons are connected in some way," he thought. "The mysteries are growing thicker. I hardly believe Aztec Jack knew what a land of mystery this was when he gave it its name. Those people are going to land pretty near here, and I am going to take the liberty to follow them a piece."

The man and girl left the canoe, and the former drew it into a place of concealment. Then they started away, little dreaming they were followed.

Harry took the greatest care not to be detected by either of the strange people of the Mystic Land, and was successful. They soon led him to the base of the fertile mountain, and began the ascent by the way of a well-worn but steep and difficult path.

"They are striking straight up toward the jutting cliff," thought the boy trailer. "I wonder what they are going there for. Perhaps they live up there somewhere."

At times the path ran dangerously near the verge of some precipitous descent, where it seemed a fall would mean certain death, yet both man and girl kept on without appearing to mind the dangers of the place.

But Harry Denton was not so familiar with the dangerous path, and he found it a difficult thing to watch the people ahead and his feet at the same time. He stepped on a treacherous round stone, and an instant later found himself tottering over a fearful fall. In vain he tried to recover his equilibrium. A cry of horror was wrung from his lips as he went plunging down—down!

CHAPTER XXV.

CASPER GOMEZ GETS HIT—"SEÑOR MARLOW!"

WITH a shout of fury, Phil Strong dashed into the glade where Anita Servedo was struggling in the arms of Casper the *vaguer*. Like an enraged lion the powerful youth tore the maiden from the Mexican's arms and dealt the wretch a terrific blow with his iron fist, striking him just below the left ear, hurling him in a quivering mass to the ground.

For a moment Phil pressed the beautiful girl to his broad breast, gazing anxiously into the depths of those melting, liquid eyes, as he hoarsely asked:

"Has that cur injured you, little one—has he dared? By Jove! if he has—"

"No, no, señor," she replied, releasing herself somewhat from his too close embrace. "He had but just seized me when you appeared, *salvador mio*." (My preserver.)

"It is well for him—the dog!"

"But killed him you have I fear, brave señor! See, see! he does not stir!"

She spoke the truth; Casper was lying where he had been hurled by that powerful blow. He remained perfectly motionless, having much the same appearance as a dead man who had met a violent end. An involuntary shudder ran over the youth as he observed this.

"I don't believe I have broken the scoundrel's neck," he said, stepping from the girl to examine the luckless Mexican. "It would but have served him right if I had, but I do not want his blood on my hands. Oh, he is well enough! He is simply knocked senseless and will come round all right in time if left alone. But I do not think he will want me to strike him again very soon."

Anita's eyes glowed with admiration.

"You are brave—very brave!" she cried. "You save me two time. *Gracias—mil gracias!* (Thanks—many thanks.) I will not forget."

"Nothing could give me greater pleasure than to be of service to one so fair," and the youth bowed, hat in hand, with the courtesy of the greatest gallant.

"Ah, ah! señor, you do flatter, as your people say," said the girl, her face now aglow with warm color.

"It is not flattery—I mean every word."

"Perhaps. But away let us go, for Casper he may awake. Then trouble there would be."

"But where is your horse, señorita?"

"I know not. I leave him last night while Don Mendoza and bad men did pursue. They did follow him, and thus I escape. I have not seen him since."

"Then we will confiscate this rascal's animal."

But when Phil attempted to secure Casper's horse the creature edged away and bolted into the bushes with a vicious whisk of his heels and a shrill squeal. At the same moment Anita cried in sudden alarm:

"Listen, Señor Philip! Some one comes!"

Phil plainly heard the approaching tread of feet, accompanied by many voices. In a moment he knew some of Don Mendoza's cut-throat gang were approaching.

"Come!"

With the word, he sprang to Anita's side and grasped her hand. Then, side by side, they turned and ran swiftly away, the youth choosing a course he believed would take them from the desperadoes. His judgment was good, but a few seconds later he heard a loud cry which denoted that Casper Gomez had been found.

"Now they will pursue!" panted the girl.

She was right. A moment later they could plainly hear the sounds of pursuit.

Phil still held fast to his Winchester repeater, and he felt that with a fair show he could hold the Mexicans hard play. He was ready to fight to the death if necessary for Luis Servedo's sister.

Of course the fugitives could not help making some noise as they ran, and that served to guide the pursuers. Suddenly Anita's foot slipped and she nearly fell to the ground, a low cry of pain breaking from her lips.

"What is it?" asked Phil, anxiously.

"My ankle—hurt it is!"

Indeed, she could scarcely bear her weight on it at that moment, showing she had given it a bad wrench.

"Fly, brave señor—save yourself! I can no further go!"

It was a desperate situation, but muscular Phil was equal to the occasion. Still clinging to his precious rifle, he caught Anita up in his arms and dashed onward with a new burst of speed that seemed little short of marvelous. As she clung to him, he heard her whisper:

"Brave—grand!"

The words seemed to give him the strength of a Samson. On he plunged with undiminished speed, the sounds of pursuit growing fainter and fainter. On—still on! Finally the sounds behind were no longer to be heard and he felt he had fairly distanced all pursuit. Not till then did he show a sign of fatigue, but then of a sudden he let his fair burden slip to the ground and sunk down beside her, panting like an overdriven race-horse.

The next that he knew she had his head in her lap and was bending close over him murmuring some excited words in Spanish. He started up in some shame at his momentary weakness, and Anita gave a little cry of delight.

"You are right now, señor?"

"I reckon so," laughed Phil. "I was a little dazed and dizzy-headed for a moment, but all that is gone. I got away with you, little one, and left the rascals in the lurch."

"Sí, señor! It is very brave and strong—and—noble you are! You are the grandest man I ever know!" and her dark eyes said even more than her lips.

Phil blushed like a school-girl, as he said:

"That is putting it a little steep. I only did my level best, as almost any one in my place would have done."

"No one that I know could have done so much, señor. You did not once my weight notice. Again I say *gracias*."

"You have repaid me a thousand times, little one, so say no more about it. One look into

those eyes is enough reward for such service. Forget it now. You must be hungry, for I am sure you have had nothing to eat to-day."

Laughingly Anita acknowledged that this was true, and Phil declared his first thought should be to provide for her hunger. She would not consent to his leaving her for a moment, and when she demonstrated that she could walk as well as ever, her ankle having been only temporarily sprained, he was delighted to have her with him. He had discovered that the Mystic Land was well stocked with small game birds, such as pheasants, quails and grouse, and he felt that in a short time he could kill enough of those birds to make a good meal, but fearing the report of his weapon would bring their foes down on them, he refrained from shooting anything for a time.

Phil's first thought was to find his friends and he chose a course which he hoped would bring them together. But after an hour of searching, he gave it up for the time, seeing his companion appeared very fatigued.

With his revolver he dispatched several grouse, and finally, coming to a spring of water, they decided to stop. While Anita made her toilet at the spring, Phil dressed the birds and prepared them for cooking. Then he built a small fire and cooked them, his fair companion watching his every movement and, making laughing comments in her delightfully odd way. Phil inwardly declared her words were the sweetest music he had ever heard, which showed he had lost his head as well as his heart.

The cooking birds sent out a delightfully savory odor, and when they were roasted to a crisp brown they looked good enough to eat. No mountain or plainsman intends ever to be short of a supply of salt, and Phil was well stocked, so he was able to season the game to suit his taste.

As soon as he had finished cooking the grouse he extinguished the fire, hoping what smoke he had already sent above the tree-tops would not lead their enemies to the spot. Then they sat down to enjoy a feast, the birds being served on fresh green leaves. Of course such a meal had its difficulties and drawbacks, but they forgot them all with merry words and laughter, and Phil was ready to declare it the most enjoyable banquet he ever took part at.

When they had satisfied their hunger Anita asked if Phil had learned anything of her brother. Phil did his best to encourage her to believe Luis was all right and would ultimately triumph over his foes, but she seemed to have suddenly grown very sad, and he was unable to cheer her.

"You know not Don Manuel Mendoza," she said, with a shake of her beautiful head. "He is one bad, bad man! Hesitate to kill my brother he will not. I hate him! If he harms Luis, I will know not peace till he is dead!"

Then Phil saw her in a new light, and gazing at her dusky face and flashing eyes, he felt she was a person who could hate with the bitterness of death. It was plain that if Don Mendoza injured her brother the Spanish maid would seek vengeance with her own hand!

"I will do all that I can to rescue Luis," declared Phil, "and my friends are ready to help me. We have agreed on a place to meet at sunset, so we shall see them then, if not before. They are as brave, true-hearted lads as ever drew breath."

"But you are so few against so many. It seems succeed you cannot. Besides, my brother killed may be before you can aid him."

Within his heart the youth knew this was true, but he did his best to convince her to the contrary. Phil felt that they would be forced to contend against desperate odds, and it almost seemed they had fallen into a death-trap when they entered the borders of the Mystic Land. Without horses they could not hope to cross the terrible desert and reach the fertile country beyond, and their horses had all been stolen. If the thieves should suddenly leave the section, taking the animals with them, the boys and the beautiful girl were all doomed.

Suddenly, while they were talking, a man stepped into the opening and advanced toward them. At a glance Phil recognized him as the person who had called himself Mohave Mat, the Mustang. Anita also recognized him, for she leaped to her feet, crying in terror:

"Señor Marlow!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

CAUGHT!—DOWN INTO THE DARKNESS.

THE Mustang advanced with what appeared to be a look of genuine amazement on his face.

"Can I believe my eyes!" he cried, speaking without a trace of the dialect he had assumed while with the boys the night before. "Is it in truth the fair señorita? By my faith, I never dreamed of such fortune!"

But Anita shrunk behind Phil's sturdy form, holding up one white hand and crying:

"Stand, Señor Marlow! Try not to lay a hand on me! You I do know for a wretch!"

Mohave Mat seemed amazed.

"Are you crazed, señorita?" he exclaimed. "I am your best friend."

"Of me you are no friend. You are a bad man—perhaps the Black Vulture. *Quien sabe?*"

A dark look settled on the Mustang's face and he would have advanced still further, but Phil said quietly, yet in a commanding tone:

"That will do. The senorita plainly does not care to have you come nearer, so you will stop there."

Almost involuntarily the man halted, but there was a dangerous glitter in his eyes, as he demanded, sneeringly:

"And who are you, sir?"

"I am this young lady's friend and at present her protector."

"The senorita does not accept unknown vagabonds as her friends and protectors."

"You are right, and for that reason she chooses to have nothing to do with you."

"Have a care, young man, or your words will cost you your life!"

"Now is that so?"

"You will find it so. If you have a liberal supply of good sense you will have a care to stand out of my path."

Phil laughed in a mocking manner.

"My dear sir, will you now permit me to inquire who you are?"

"I am one whose word is law in this part of Arizona, as you may yet find to your sorrow."

"Then you confess that you are not Mohave Mat, the Mustang? It is plain you lied when you gave that as your name."

"You have a very indiscreet tongue, my fine fellow, and I promise you those words shall cost you dear. A man may have a dozen names in this Territory."

"To be sure—a name for every crime. But if I am not mistaken you need more than a dozen names to supply your wants."

The self-styled Mustang's hand flew toward a weapon, but Phil had been expecting such a move, and he "covered" the man with a ready revolver, crying sharply:

"Drop it! Try to pull a pop and down you go!"

The words arrested the desperado's move and his face became black with fury.

"You are mighty handy with your weapons, young fellow," he growled.

"Just handy enough on such occasions as these," was the laughing reply. "I have not spent several years in the wild Southwest for nothing. If it should become necessary, I could cut the top button off your jacket with a single shot."

The man lost color a little, then broke into a hard laugh.

"You are something of a boaster I see. Let me tell you the best thing you can do is put up that weapon. It is useless for you to butt against me. I have come here for that girl and I will have her."

Anita uttered a low cry and drew still further behind her youthful friend.

"Have no fear, little one," said Phil, in a low tone. "I have the drop and am a match for this one man anyway."

"But I fear he is not alone, brave senor. Friends he must have near."

"The little one is right," declared the man, with a triumphant laugh. "I have a dozen men within call."

Phil saw that the situation was much more serious than he had imagined, but, with an undaunted front, he faced the dark-faced villain, saying firmly:

"It will be a very bad thing for you, sir, if you attempt to call up any of your satellites."

"Dost think so, younker? Look here," and he exhibited a small silver whistle held between the thumb and fore finger of his left hand.

"Well?"

"One blast on that will call my men to this spot."

"One blast on that will seal your fate, for I will send a bullet through you the moment it touches your lips!"

There was a stern yet calm and even sound to the young man's words that plainly indicated he meant just what he said. They had a determined, deadly ring that was decidedly unpleasant to the threatened man.

"You are a fool, boy!" he cried, impatiently. "I tell you the truth when I say this glade is surrounded by my men!"

"And I tell you the truth when I say I will surely shoot you if you give them the signal to attack me."

At that moment Anita gave a scream of terror and dismay, and a long, snaky noose that came circling through the air fell fairly down over the young man's shoulders, pinning his arms to his sides. The next moment he was jerked from his feet and thrown violently upon his back, his revolver being discharged by his involuntary contraction of his finger on the trigger.

"Hold him, lads!" shouted the pseudo-mustanger, as he bounded forward. "Hold him hard! Ha! ha!"

Before Phil could make an attempt to arise the man leaped upon him. But although the youth's arms were pinned his feet were not. He saw the man coming and quickly drew his knees toward his chin, then, as the treacherous wretch came down on him, his feet shot out striking the

man fairly in the pit of the stomach and hurling him backward. The rascal gave a loud grunt as he came down heavily on the ground.

With yells of triumph, several men bounded into the opening, some of them seizing the terrified girl, others hastening to secure the overthrown youth. The latter was found a difficult task, although Phil was hampered by the lasso. In some way he struggled to his feet and met the foremost desperado with a kick that sent him to grass beside his chief.

Uttering terrible oaths, the false Mustang sat up, clinging to his stomach and shouting for his men to secure the fighting lad alive.

"I'll have his blood!" he roared. "Ouch! thunder! I'll string and quarter him! Oh, Moses!"

But Phil seemed slippery as an eel. He squirmed from the hands which seized him, kicked one man's feet from under him, planted his head in another's stomach and threw his body against a third with such violence that the fellow was hurled to the ground. It almost seemed that he was a match for his many foes, hampered as he was.

"Down him!" shouted the chief, getting on his feet. "Throw him! That is the best way to handle the imp. Let me get my claws on him!"

Phil had his eyes on the speaker, and as the man once more rushed forward he again received a terrific kick that once more hurled him to the ground. Seemingly determined on stamping the life out of the treacherous rascal, the powerful young man forced his way toward the spot where he fell. Seeing this, the chief hastily crawled away on his hands and knees, swearing like a brigand.

But the unequal battle could not last long. Phil was swiftly becoming exhausted by his mighty exertions, and the snarling horde were fixing their claws upon his clothes. Suddenly he was hurled to the ground, and the triumphant ruffians sprung upon him and pinned him there, seeming determined on crushing the breath from his body.

Finding it was useless to struggle longer, Phil submitted, although his flashing eyes told his spirit was not subdued by any means.

"Bind him tightly!" cried the chief. "By Christopher! he is the grittiest fighter I ever saw! He nearly kicked the wind all out of me."

"It would have been a fine thing for the country had I quite kicked it out of you, and you had never recovered," panted Phil.

"Bah!" mocked the man, as he strode forward and struck the brave youth with his open hand. "Take that, and learn to keep your tongue between your teeth."

"A coward's blow!" hissed the young man, his face white as marble. "You are all a cowardly set of curs!"

"Ha, ha!" mocked the chief. "Your blood is boiling now, my daring lad, and you dare say such things. But when you come to your senses and stand face to face with death, I fancy you will sing a different tune. Then you will beg like a child for your life."

"Of you—never!"

"We shall see. And now, Anita, *alma mia*, you are mine at last! You cannot escape me now."

The poor girl made no reply, but a look of deepest repulsion showed plainly on her face.

"Now, boys," said the leader, "we will take our prizes to the regions below."

He waved his hand, and the youth and maiden were borne quickly away. In a short time they came to some horses, and the two unfortunates were bound upon the backs of two animals. Then the desperate gang mounted, and, with the chief leading, rode rapidly away.

Phil saw a chance to speak a few low words of encouragement to his fair companion, but she only shook her head, replying:

"They are wolves, noble senor! I dare not think of the fate that awaits us! For what you have done you have my heart—my whole heart!"

"And I will live to claim it yet, little one! Heaven will smile on us yet, I believe."

Into Dead Valley clattered the bandits and their captives. A moment they halted in front of the black and forbidding-appearing opening which Aztec Jack had pointed out to the boys, and the chief turned to Phil, saying:

"Take your last look at the sunlit world, young man. You will never draw a breath in the open air after you pass into that opening! Your doom is sealed!"

Then, at a word, they rode downward, and darkness shut them in!

CHAPTER XXVII.

"THE DEAD ALIVE!"

A FEELING of terror seized Harry Denton as he found himself tottering on the brink of that terrible fall. Wildly he waved his arms in the vain endeavor to regain his balance, and then, when he saw he must surely fall, a hoarse cry was wrung from his lips.

Then he went plunging downward!

He felt a severe shock and knew he was sliding along a smooth, sloping surface. Madly he

tried to clutch at the smooth face of the rock, but his fingers found no crevice sufficient to stay his fall. Through his mind flashed the thought that he would be dead in another moment, dashed to a shapeless mass on the cruel rocks below. He had come to the Mystic Land to die!

Suddenly he seemed to shoot off into space, and an instant later came a fearful shock followed by a blank.

But Harry was not killed by the fall by any means. When he recovered consciousness he was amazed to find himself lying on a comfortable couch and feel a soft, wet hand bathing his face with cool water.

At first the injured youth did not have strength enough to fully open his eyes, but through the lashes he could dimly see near his own a sweet, girlish face that wore an expression of anxiety.

Then he heard a low voice say:

"He does not come round, uncle. I fear he is much more seriously injured than you thought."

There was a slight stir near at hand and the voice of a man replied:

"There are no bones broken, and I see no earthly reason why he should not have come round before this. Had he gone to the bottom of the mountain, he would have been instantly killed. That old tree saved him, although he received a severe blow on the head quite near the temple. Still I say his bones are all whole and he should be himself ere this."

Harry realized he had escaped death in some remarkable manner, and had been taken in care by the very people he was following at the time of the accident. They had probably heard his cry and hastened back to learn the cause. Then something told him they had brought him to their home, wherever that was. By a great exertion he succeeded in fully opening his eyes and faintly whispering:

"I am all right."

"Oh, Uncle Amos!" cried the girl, in delight, "see, he has revived!"

The strange man came and looked down at the unfortunate youth, nodding in a satisfied manner, as he said:

"So he has—so he has! I was sure I could not be mistaken. Well, young man, you had a close call."

Harry smiled faintly, replying:

"I think you must be right, sir. When I was falling I felt it was my last call."

"It surely came very near that. Your escape is little short of a miracle. But a miss is as good as a mile. How did you happen to fall?"

"It was caused by a loose stone."

"Yes; but how came you there to step on the stone?"

"I was following you," was the frank reply.

"Ah, hum! I thought so." Then the man turned and walked away without saying anything more.

Harry glanced round the room and saw that it was plainly the interior of a rudely-constructed hut, but everywhere there were signs of a woman's hands and taste, softening the harsh features of the apartment. On a stand near the center of the room lay some well-worn books and a guitar.

But finally the youth's eyes came back and rested with a look of interest and admiration on the face of the young girl at his side.

She was not over seventeen years old, and had features which it would be impossible to describe with the words at my command. I have said she was beautiful; if I said more I might spoil the picture which the word *beautiful* has painted in the reader's mind. Her beauty was not of the kind that came under any particular classification. It was distinct, peculiar, original—as fresh and fair as the sweetest wild-flower of the plains.

Harry's glance of admiration brought the warm color to the fair girl's cheek, and she half-turned away for a moment. But she quickly wheeled, asking, with true solicitude:

"How do you feel now, sir?"

"Pretty well, thank you; though my head is buzzing a bit, and throbs with a dull, heavy pain."

"You received quite a severe cut not far from the left temple. I have bathed and bandaged it, as well as I could."

"For which you have my sincere thanks. I will not soon forget your kindness. But I think I will get up now."

However, when he essayed to rise, he discovered he was very weak, and he sunk back with a deep breath of surprise and dismay that was half a groan.

"Gracious! I am weak as a kitten!"

"You had better keep quiet for a time, young man," said the man, approaching the cot and gazing down at the injured youth. "It will be best for you. You certainly received a severe shaking up, and need a rest. I would advise you to sleep."

Then, after calling the girl aside and speaking a few words to her in a low tone, he picked up a heavy rifle and left the hut.

The girl came back to the cot, asking:

"Is there anything more I can do to make you comfortable, sir?"

"I think not, miss; you seem to have taken great pains for my comfort already. But now

we have met, we may as well become acquainted. My name is Harry Denton."

"And mine is Wilma Winwood," replied the girl, frankly. "I live here with my uncle, Amos Winwood."

For a moment the youth fancied he had heard the latter name before, but his memory did not serve him well just then and he could not recall when or where it was.

"Wilma Winwood—an odd name and a pretty one," said Harry. "I hope we may become friends, Miss Winwood."

But she shook her head, a slight look of alarm on her face.

"Uncle says I must have no friends for a time but him," she responded.

"Whew!" whistled the youth. "Isn't that just a bit unreasonable? And why do you live here in this strange place?"

"You must not ask too many questions, sir, for my uncle has forbidden me telling some things."

"So your tongue is bound. Well, one thing is sure, you have not always lived here."

"How do you know that?"

"By your manner. It is plain you have not been forever isolated from society of all kinds."

"You are right, sir. We once lived in Santa Fe. But my uncle has told me the best society is scarcely to be found in that place. In truth I know very little of what you call society."

"And perhaps you are the better off. But I see you have books and a guitar there."

"Yes, they are my only companions at times, for I am much alone."

"And do you not fear to remain alone in this desolate place?"

"I did not once, for there was no one here save ourselves; but within the last ten days both red and white people have come here. Uncle Amos does not know what to think of it. He says we will have to move again."

"He must be something of a hermit?"

"No, no; he would like to go back to civilization and live as dearly as I would, but—"

"But what?"

"I had better say no more. I fear I have said too much already. Uncle Amos has his private reasons for remaining in seclusion in this lonely land."

"He is a criminal, I'll bet a dollar!" thought Harry. "He does not dare return to civilization for fear of being nabbed." Aloud, he asked: "Where has he gone?"

"Down the mountain. You have probably surmised that this cabin is far up the mountain-side on a wooded cliff. The timber shelters it from the view of any one below and so it makes quite a secure retreat."

"But why should your uncle hide himself from the world in such a way?"

She laughed and shook her head.

"You must not ask me that, sir."

"Well," cried Harry, warmly, "it is a shame to bury you here from the world!"

"It is on my account he remains here."

"Your account?" in amazement.

"Yes; but I must stop talking entirely. I plainly see, for if I do not, you will succeed in getting me to tell forbidden things."

They both laughed merrily, and Harry begged her not to stop talking, agreeing to cease asking questions. Then they began chatting of books and other things, and it was not long before Harry discovered the girl was highly intelligent and remarkably well informed for one who lived thus beyond the border line of civilization. She declared her uncle had taught her all she knew, and she seemed to think he knew everything. Harry was fairly fascinated by her frank, agreeable manner and unaffected language.

In the midst of their talk a figure darkened the open doorway. Wilma looked up expecting to see her uncle, then sprung to her feet with a cry of alarm, for the man was unknown to her. At a glance Harry saw it was the mad Treasure-Seeker.

"Hello, lad!" cried Jack. "So I hev foun' ye, hev I? Waal, I— Great God!"

The strange man staggered back, glaring at Wilma as if he saw a spirit, while the frightened maiden shrunk from him in dismay.

For an instant it seemed that Aztec Jack would sink to the ground. His eyes fairly bulged from the sockets while his entire frame shook with emotion. He caught at the side of the open doorway to support himself, hoarsely gasping:

"The dead alive!"

A moment later he wheeled and vanished from the doorway, not heeding Harry's cry to him.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

HARRY AND WILMA—WINWOOD'S WARNING.

FINDING Aztec Jack did not hear or heed his words, Harry, with a sudden strength, sprung from the couch and hurried to the open door, reaching it just in time to see the singular man disappearing at a run down the mountain path.

"Jack—oh, Jack!" he shouted, but his only answer was the echoes of his cry.

"I must follow him," said Harry, as he turned back into the cabin. "He is my friend and I fear he will do himself injury. He often has strange wild spells wherein he falls like one dead. I fear one of those spells will come on before he recovers from his present excitement, so I think I had better follow him at once."

By this time Wilma had recovered in a measure from her alarm, and she cried:

"No, no! please do not go! You are not strong enough yet."

"I am all right," declared the lad, but he staggered a little as he walked across the room.

"I feel as if I must follow my friend."

"Again I ask you to remain. Uncle Amos said you were to stay till he returned."

"What right has he to detain me?"

She shrunk back a bit, hurt more by his manner than his words. He saw this, and hastened to say:

"Pardon me, Miss Winwood; I have been in the habit of doing exactly as I pleased for so long that the thought of being dictated to starts me a bit. I meant no offense, but I think it almost necessary that I follow my friend."

"And leave me here alone?"

There was something in the appeal that touched the youth, but he said, quickly:

"You told me you were not afraid to remain here alone."

"I said I was not afraid once."

"But you are now?"

"Well—I wish you would not go now."

"By Jove! I will not. To tell the truth, I begin to doubt my ability to descend that path just at present, for I find my legs are a trifle weak."

"I am glad you will stay," she declared, as he lay down on the cot once more, drawing a deep breath of relief. "I will do what I can to amuse you, sir."

"Thank you, Wilma—may I call you that?"

"If you wish," she replied, looking somewhat surprised and half-laughing as she sat down in an easy-chair quite near the couch.

"And will you call me Harry?"

"Why, sir, our acquaintance—"

"Has been brief I will admit; but why should we be bound by any rules of politeness beyond those that nature dictates? We are beyond the bounds of fine-grade civilization and outside society's formal circle. Let's act natural."

"Your appeal is very persuasive," she laughed.

"Then we will consider it settled, Wilma. Let's shake hands over it and thus seal the compact."

Laughingly they did so.

"Now," said Harry, "we are friends. Remember we are more than mere acquaintances—we are friends."

She could but admire his charming audacity, and was forced to admit that they were friends, although she added in the most bewitching manner that she did not know what her uncle would think of it.

"Hang your uncle!" thought Harry, but he was careful not to speak his thoughts aloud.

She asked him about Aztec Jack, and he told her all about the mad Treasure-Seeker. He also told her of himself and his friends. Then, for the first time since being hurt, he remembered how the jolly little Irish lad had sunk beneath the water of the lake and he had seen him rise no more. He told her about Barney's untimely fate, and she tried to cheer him with the belief that, as he had not recovered the body of his friend, the Irish youth might not be dead. But Harry felt sure this could not be so, for had Barney escaped death, he believed he would have surely made the fact known.

After a time Wilma succeeded in leading Harry to think and talk of other things, and when he asked her to play and sing, she readily consented. Harry lay and watched her white fingers admiringly, but when she began to sing he was fairly charmed by the power and sweetness of her voice. Like one enraptured he listened till the last mellow note had died away, then for a few moments a dead silence fell around them.

"Well, sir," she said, with a faint show of disappointment, "you do not even say it is passable."

"Wilma," cried the youth, earnestly, "I am unable to express my pleasure in words! You have a glorious voice—the sweetest I ever heard! But where you learned to sing like that I cannot imagine. It was far more delightful than the singing of some professionals I have heard."

"Oh, oh! I am afraid that is flattery! I only looked for a plain compliment," she said, in her charmingly frank and unaffected manner.

"And I meant every word I said," he insisted, seeing this beautiful girl knew little of the artful ways and double-meaning words of her society sister. "Please sing again."

Pleased by his words, she complied, rendering "Home, Sweet Home" in a manner that would have called forth rounds of applause from a theater audience. As the words of the sweetly pathetic old song rung in his ears, Harry found his eyes blinded with tears, his thoughts going back to the dearly loved home of his boyhood. Through the misty veil he watched her wondrously expressive face, believing that at last in

the sordid, selfish old world he had found a being whose heart was as pure as an angel's. How he longed to tell her the thoughts which strove so madly for utterance! But his better judgment prevailed and he choked them back.

So the time slipped away.

Finally, Wilma brought him the picture of her mother—a dim, time-faded tintype. At a glance he saw the woman had looked remarkably like her child. Indeed, had he not been told the truth, he would have thought it the picture of the girl at his side, taken when she was attired in the garments of twenty years before.

"She died when I was very young," said Wilma. "I can scarcely remember her."

"You must look wonderfully like her."

"So uncle says. He declares I am the very image of her."

"Was she his sister?"

"I—I think not."

"Then he must be your father's brother?"

"I suppose so."

"Has he never told you?"

"No."

"That is strange, to say the least."

"I have thought so sometimes, but when I questioned him, he would evade giving me the answers I sought."

"The crafty old rascal!" thought Harry. "I will bet two to one he is not related to her in any way."

Wilma produced a picture of her father, but it was dimmer than that of her mother, being so faded that the features were very indistinct. However, when he had examined it closely, the youth cried:

"I believe I have seen that man!"

"Impossible! He died fourteen years ago."

"But I have seen some one who had those eyes. They are the only features that show plain and distinct. That is strange, for in a tintype the eyes are usually about the first to fade."

The more Harry examined the picture the greater became his conviction that he had at some time in his life seen a person who was remarkably like the resemblance in his hand. But he was unable to quite recall just when he had seen the person.

While the youth and maiden were bending over the picture, Amos Winwood entered the room. He looked surprised at their position, and seemed very displeased when he saw the picture in their hands.

"Hello!" he exclaimed. "So you are coming out all right, young man. You may thank us for that."

"I do thank you, sir," said Harry, although he flushed a bit at the man's words and manner. "You were—"

"Yes, yes," interrupted Winwood, somewhat rudely. "I know what you would say, so you need not say it. We did what was plainly our duty. And now, Wilma, something to eat for us all, then we will bid this young man a very good-day."

"Ho, ho!" flashed through the youth's mind. "So I am to be unceremoniously fired."

Wilma soon busied herself about preparing the victuals, while Winwood sat down and questioned Harry closely. The young treasure-hunter was careful not to tell things he would be sorry for afterward, therefore Amos Winwood received very little satisfaction. Finally the man said:

"We have done you a good turn, my boy, and now I want you to give me a promise. You cannot refuse under the circumstances."

"What is it, sir?"

"I want you to promise you will bring none of your friends to this place."

Harry hesitated, but after a time he gave the promise, first explaining that Aztec Jack had already been there. He fancied the man looked startled at this.

"It makes little difference," Winwood finally said. "We shall soon leave this place. It has become infested with red-skins, and white men of doubtful character. But there is one great danger that I fear. That old volcano is not dead, but sleeps. Some day before long it will break forth once more in all its fury, filling this fair land with destruction and death. Then woe to whoever is caught in the fiery rain! More than once have I heard the old mountain groaning like an angry giant that was confined. Some time it will break its prison bars."

The rude table was finally spread, and they sat down to eat. The meal passed almost in silence, for an unpleasant spell seemed to have fallen on the three inmates of the mountain hut. Several times the eyes of the youth and maiden met, but no words passed between them till Harry suddenly cried:

"Oh, Wilma! I came near forgetting, but did I not see you some nights ago far beyond the desert to the south? You were mounted on a snow-white horse, and dashed past a spring where I had camped for the night. I pursued, but did not overtake you, for certain reasons. It was you?"

Amos Winwood arose, his face dark as a thunder-cloud.

"Young man, you presume on short acquaintance!" he said sternly. "Wilma, you need not answer the question. You have learned her name, sir, but I trust she has not told you many

things she should not. We will now bid you good-day."

He brought Harry's hat and rifle and conducted the youth to the door. Harry looked back and saw the beautiful girl standing gazing wistfully after him, and for an instant his heart was hot with rebellion. But he curbed his passion, believing a time would soon come that they would meet again.

"Good-by, Wilma!" he cried.

"Good-by!" she replied, sadly.

Then he turned away and began the descent.

CHAPTER XXIX.

BARNEY'S NARRATION—INTO THE PASSAGE.

LIKE one in a dream Harry made his way down the mountain, scarcely heeding the dangers of the descent. He reached the foot of the mountain in safety and paused to look back at the wooded cliff on which was built the cabin he had lately left.

"We shall meet again, Wilma," he said, softly, speaking as if the girl were present. "That man who pretends to be your uncle shall not keep us apart. I am confident he has deceived you and you are no relative of his."

"But what's to be done next? Where is Phil or Jack? I know where to find them at sunset, but that is still many hours away. I believe I will look for the body of poor Barney once more. It may have risen to the surface by this time."

He turned toward the lake and was soon approaching the cliff from which the Irish lad had fallen in the clutch of his red foe. Suddenly he halted in amazement too great for words, for he plainly heard a familiar voice singing:

"O'm a jolly Irish lad, ye bet,
Dearly do Oi love the rollin' say
Wheer the warther's sure t' make yees wet
If yees take a toonible in the spray."

"It will sp'ile yer Sunday matin' clothes,
An' the starreh will come out av yer shirrut;
It will wash the sunburn fram yer nose,
An' it's sure t' git yees clane av dirrut."

"Begorra; that's a fact! It's wan long day since Barney Brady has had sech anither beaucherful warshin'. It's meself as fales loike Oi was soked cl'ane t' me bones."

Astounded, scarcely crediting his hearing, Harry crept forward till he reached a point where he could see the singer reclining on the ground with the greater part of his clothes hanging where they could dry on a bush in the sun. It was indeed Barney Brady!

"Oi wonder wheer Harry is, Oi dunno," said Barney, speaking aloud to himself. "It's thinkin' me did intoirely he will be. But Oi'm a mighty harrud b'y t' kill."

"I believe you," said Harry, stepping out into view.

The little Irishman leaped to his feet, joyfully crying:

"Hurro! It's Harry, b'y, sure enough! It's tickled ter dith Oi am t' say ye, lad."

Then, as they clasped hands, Harry said:

"Words cannot express my amazement and delight, Barney. It seems too good to be true, for I had given you up as surely drowned in the lake. How you escaped is still a great puzzle to me, and you must explain at once."

"O'll do that same, me daisy. It's plain thit Oi w'u'd bin did bafore this if it hadn't bin fer yees, lad."

"For me—how is that?"

"Thit rid nayger was chokin' the wind outen me whin you spotted him with a lead pill, Harry. Oi was beginnin' t' say more stars thit Oi iver did bafore. Oi herrud your shot jist as we went under, but the imp uv Satan hung t' me throax loike he w'u'd niver let go."

"Still I hit him?"

"Ye gave him his larrust fit av sickness. It was the death-grip thit the crayther hid on me throax, an' he hung t' it till iverything becum black, an' Oi didn't know anything at all, at all."

"I watched from the cliff here, and did not see either you or the red-skin rise to the surface."

"We cum up jist the same, Harry, b'y, but it was bark under the cliff. The nixt thit Oi knew afther it all becum black Oi found meself layin' with me hid out av warther an' me body in it. Oi was locked farrust in the grip av this rid varmint, but the crayther was did intoirely. Farchunately he hid lit up on me throax, an' so Oi was ale t' ketch me wind wance more. Fer a bit av a toime Oi laid theer an' didn't know whither Oi was did or not, but Oi soon diskivered it was the Injun thit was did."

"And you were under this cliff?"

"Sure as preachin', b'y. Theer is an openin' down theer clost t' the warther aboot thrae or four fath boigh, an' whin ye go bark under a bit, theer is a shore. It was on thit shore in the deloightfully soft mud thit we was layin'. Whin we come t' the surface it was theer thit we was, an' theer we stayed till Oi kem t' me since."

"How long was that?"

"Faith an' Oi hiv no m'anes av knowin'. It might biv bin tin minutes or wan hour, Oi dunno."

"I suppose you swam out here as soon as you came to?"

"Niver a bit av it. But sit down, Harry, me jewil, an' Oi will tell yees all about it. It is the strangest story ye iver herrud in all yer loife."

The two boys seated themselves, and Barney began:

"The firrust thing Oi was afther doin' was ter git out av the did haythen's arrums. He was quito affectionate an' didn't same ter want ter let me go, but Oi got away afther a toime an' crawled up cut av the warther, afther which Oi squazed a bit av the dampness out av me clothes an' congratulated meself thit it was the Injun as was did. Oi let him lay an' soak a bit, fer Oi thort it w'u'd do him good as he smelled loike he hadn't same warther bafore fer a month av Soon-days."

"Afther a bit Oi began t' look round me an' Oi saw the hole kept straight on inther ther bank, growin' larrger all the toime. Thin Oi began t' reckon thit if Oi follyed it it w'u'd lade me out somewheer an' Oi'd not hev t' go bark inther the warther an' git any wetter. Oi was so soaked thit Oi was afraid Oi'd come all t' paces if Oi got inther ther drink again."

"So Oi braced up a bit an' follyed me nose in ther darkness, the hole gittin' larrge enough soon so thit Oi c'u'd stan' up. Oi reckoned Oi wasn't in a b'ar's hole, fer Oi river herrud of wan thit swom t' its hole. Oi felt most moighty sart'in thit the hole hed bin made by the harnd av mon but thit it hed not bin used fer a right good bit av a whoile."

"Well, Harry, Oi kept on goin' an' goin' in the darrukness till Oi began t' be frightened fer fear Oi'd niver foind me way bark ag'in. It samed Oi traveled near a moile whin all av a sudden the hole became so small thit Oi hid t' git down on me barnds an' knees an' crawl through. By thit toime Oi was wishin' Oi was bark in Auld Oireland, an' more thin wance Oi came near turnin' bark, but Oi thought it might be nearer out if Oi kept straight on."

"Afther Oi hed crawled through the small hole Oi found it grew larrger ag'in. Oi wint on moighty slow, falin' me way in the darruk. Oi did no go fur bafore Oi saw a loight. At first Oi thought Oi hed come t' an openin', but the nixt secont Oi diskivered my mistake. It wasn't the roight koin'd av a loight an' it was movin'!"

"Moving, Barney?"

"Yis, be me faith! Oi crept on an' found thit loight was kerried by a mon. Jist about thit Oi found thit the passage hed come to an ind an' Oi stood in what samed loike a larrge cave. For a toime Oi didn't know whut t' do, an' Oi didn't durst l'ave the place for fear av losin' the passage an' not bein' able t' iver foind it ag'in. Pretty soon Oi saw the loight ag'in an' c'u'd say the mon thit carried it. Thin he wint out av soight an' Oi laid still sam more."

"It samed thit Oi layed theer fer moighty nigh two hours whin Oi herrud a big bullyabaloo away off somewheer thit soundid loike fifty min tryin' t' split the throax av thim. Oi didn't know whut it c'u'd m'ane an' so Oi jist kept still."

"It wasn't a grate bit av a whoile bafore Oi saw two min comin' torruds me, wan av thim havin' a loight. You may balieve Barney Brady laid moighty low jist thit. But Oi was jist struck all av a heap whin, as they kin nearer, Oi saw thit Oi knew the all two both av thim. Guess who they was, Harry, b'y?"

"Don't ask me, Barney," cried Harry, excitedly. "Go on."

"Well, may Oi be blissed be all the S'int's if wan av thim wasn't the very same auld fraud thit calls hisself Mohave Mat!"

"And the other?"

"Was thit skoonk, Don Manuel Mendoza?"

"Ah!"

"It is a fact, Harry, b'y. They stopped so fur away thit Oi c'u'dn't hear all they hed t' say, but Oi did hear the auld Don tell t'other wan thit the girrul was his now thit they hed her fast, but thit he must kill the b'y. The ither b'aste sed he w'u'd take keer av thit. Thin they spoke av another wan as hed bin caught with the girrul an' sed he must die too. Afther thit they warruked away, an' Oi made up me moind t' turn round an' git out. It did not take me long t' do thit same, an' hear Oi am."

"Barney, you have made a remarkable and most important discovery," cried Harry, springing to his feet. "I believe you have found a secret passage that leads into the Buried City. More than that, I feel almost sure that Phil has fallen into the hands of the desperadoes who seem to have taken possession of the lost city, and he was the third prisoner spoken of. If I am right, he is in terrible danger, and we must go to his aid as soon as possible. Get on your clothes while I am after a canoe, and we will at once make our way into the passage."

Twenty minutes later Amos Winwood's canoe carried the two boys to the small opening beneath the cliff.

"Theer it is," asserted Barney.

When the canoe touched they were able to crawl out into the low passage, but could not stand erect by considerable. Pulling the light craft into the mouth of the hole, they took a final look at their weapons to see that they were in working order, then together they crept noiselessly into the darkness.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE MADMAN'S FATE—IN THE POWER OF THE DESERT VAMPIRES.

HARRY DENTON did not know that Amos Winwood followed him down the mountain, but such was the fact. Winwood took care to keep so far back that the youth would not be liable to see him if he should turn round, but Harry did not once look back after passing out of sight of the cabin on the cliff.

At the foot of the mountain the man stood still and watched Harry till the latter was out of sight, then he turned away in another direction, muttering:

"I must take a look at the horses. It is plain that we must leave this place very soon, and I think we will start to-morrow. Dangers are increasing on every hand. I was forced to make a pretension of anger in order to have an excuse to summarily get rid of that young fellow after he had eaten. He was learning altogether too much. And so he saw Wilma when she had escaped from the clutches of the Indians who captured her and carried her away to the south. I trailed them across the desert, and at the southern border I first saw this young fellow with a strange man who had Norton Downing's eyes and voice but not his face. At first I thought it was Downing, but a second thought convinced me of my folly. Norton died years ago, poor fellow!"

Thus the man muttered to himself as he walked along. His eyes were fastened on the ground, and for the time he seemed unconscious of his surroundings.

"Yes, Norton Downing is dead—"

"Liar! Norton Downing still lives!"

With a cry of amazement, the man looked up and then started back.

Aztec Jack stood before him!

The eyes of the two men met, and in the madman's glowing orbs was a deadly light.

"I am Norton Downing!" he hissed, still glaring at the amazed man before him. "Traacherous dog—false friend of the past! we have met at last—at last!"

There was a fiendish, joyful ring to his words and a dancing demon in his eyes. For a time his tongue played between his parted lips like the tongue of an angry serpent. Speechless, like one under a spell, Amos Winwood stared at the being who confronted him—a being with the eyes and voice of a dead man!

"Ah—! You do not speak!" snarled Aztec Jack. "Has terror frozen your dastardly tongue, Amos Winwood? Has fear paralyzed your limbs now that you are face to face with the man you did such a fiendish wrong in the long ago?"

With a mighty effort Winwood regained control of his shaken nerves and hoarsely cried:

"For Heaven's sake who are you? The dead cannot come to life!"

"Did you think I was dead?" with a blood-chilling laugh. "Oh, no! they did not kill me in the mad-house where you threw me after you had drugged me to unconsciousness and stolen all my money. No, they did not kill me, but they tried hard enough. I escaped after long years, and since then I have been wandering over the face of the earth, searching—searching for you—you!"

"Man, you are mad!"

A bitter laugh came from that white beard, and Jack threw his clinched hands above his head in a strange, wild gesture.

"Mad!" he cried. "Who would not be mad after all the years of horror that I endured! I know I am mad at times—and this is one of my times! The sight of your false, treacherous face has filled my brain with seething flames! I feel a hundred demons dancing in my bosom! I long to spring upon you and fasten my fingers at your throat with a death-clutch! I would tear you limb from limb and trample your body beneath my feet! Yes, yes! I am mad—mad!"

Filled with an unutterable horror, Amos Winwood retreated as the furious speaker advanced several steps. He would have turned and fled, but he dared not take his eyes from the maniac's gleaming orbs. And yet he was sure a terrible struggle for life was certain if he did not escape before the madman leaped upon him.

"I have found you at last!" Aztec Jack continued, wildly. "I knew I must find you after a time. And now, demon, where is my child?"

"It cannot be you are Norton Downing," gasped Winwood, still being unable to believe such a thing possible.

"I am Norton Downing. I did not die in the mad-house."

"No, no; but your body was recovered from the river. The fishes had eaten the face some, but the clothes were yours."

"So that was your trick? And with it you killed my wife—my darling Dora! We were rivals before I won the prize; after that you pretended to become my friend. But you were a serpent—a treacherous devil! You had me thrust into the mad-house and my clothes were placed on the mutilated body of a man found drowned in the river. You made my wife believe me dead by your dastardly trick, hoping to secure her for your own. But the shock killed her—and you are her murderer!"

"You are mistaken. There is a terrible mistake—I can see it now. Listen—I believe I can explain."

"Stop! I do not want to hear your lies! Your tongue is false—false as Satan's! You would try to deceive me by your crafty stories, but I am not to be deceived. Years ago you took advantage of my love for gold and passion for gambling and led me into the dreadful net you had spread. I am not to be deceived again. Again I ask, where is my child?"

"For Heaven's sake, listen!" cried Winwood, desperately.

"Where is my child?" thundered Aztec Jack, flocks of white froth beginning to fly from his lips. "Speak quick, for I feel another terrible spell approaching, and I must kill you before I fall unconscious! Where is little Dot? The truth, wretch, before I tear your tongue from your head!"

There was a fearful light in the maniac's eyes—eyes which seemed like coals of fire at that moment. Slowly had he advanced, till but a short distance separated the two men. Winwood held up his hands, seeming cowed and frightened by the fury of the white-bearded man.

"Will you speak?" Jack almost shouted.

"You must listen!" gasped the one addressed.

"Fool!" snarled the madman, suddenly drawing a long knife. "I have no time to listen to your lies! Already my brain reels, and black spots dance before my eyes. I must not delay my vengeance! I will find the child, but you die—now!"

He leaped forward, striking at Winwood with the long knife. The imperiled man seemed suddenly to recover a portion of his self-possession, and with a sharp blow he struck the knife aside.

Then Aztec Jack stumbled and fell, the hand that clutched the knife being under him. He uttered a hollow groan and lay quite still.

For an instant Winwood stood rooted to the spot with horror. The unexpected termination of the attack almost completely deprived him of strength.

"Great heavens!" he groaned. "What have I done?"

From some unknown point close at hand, a voice replied:

"You have murdered Norton Downing!"

Startled, amazed, he glared around him, but not a person was to be seen. It seemed that the voice had come out of the air over his head.

"That was the voice of Russel Craig!"

Gasping the words, the terrified man turned and fled like a startled deer, leaving the body of Aztec Jack where it fell. He did not glance over his shoulder, but he fancied he heard the steady patter of pursuing feet.

Straight toward the mountain path Amos Winwood dashed, an indescribable tumult in his bosom. He felt sure that the maniac had fallen upon his own knife and was dead, but Russel Craig still lived, a foe to be dreaded and shunned.

Panting and staggering he labored up the steep path, feeling a mad desire to rush on, on, yet lacking the strength to move faster.

Wilma was amazed when her uncle burst into the hut, panting from his exertion and looking like one on the verge of insanity. For a time he dropped into a seat and was speechless.

"What is it?" cried the girl, filled with terror at his appearance. "Oh, what has happened?"

"Prepare—to move—at once!" he gasped. "There must not be a moment of needless delay!"

But she was too amazed and alarmed to heed his words at once. Seeing this, he sprang up, crying:

"Pack, pack, Wilma! We must get away! I cannot stop to tell you all now. Pack, pack!"

Frightened almost to the verge of tears, she hastened to obey. He also sprang to the work with feverish haste.

"The provisions, child, attend to them. I will see to this other stuff now. We will leave this mountain within the hour."

"What is it?" she faltered again. "Is another eruption of the volcano at hand?"

"I know not, but your enemies and mine are here. Once more we must find a new home."

For thirty minutes they worked, then another form darkened the doorway and a masked man strode into the hut. He was closely followed by half a dozen others.

"Ho, ho!" cried the leader of the intruders. "We are just in time it seems. The birds are on the point of taking flight."

In an instant Amos Winwood placed himself between the girl and the masked men, at the same time drawing a revolver and pointing it at the leader, while he cried:

"Stand, youimps of Satan, or I will pull trigger! What do you want here?"

"Light and easy, Amos, old boy," came from beneath the mask of the chief. "We outnumber you bad. You may as well surrender quietly."

"Never! Your face is hidden by a mask, but I know you, Russel Craig, and I will fight you as long as I can stand! You shall never possess this fair girl while I live!"

"Then the hour of your death has arrived! At him, boys!"

With fierce yells, the desperadoes leaped forward. Just one shot did the desperate man fire, then they closed in on him. Fiercely, madly he struggled, but the odds were too great. In the end he was overpowered, thrown upon the ground and bound. Wilma, who had bravely attempted to aid her uncle, was also made a captive.

"Very well done, my lads," laughed the masked chief, looking down at the helpless man at his feet. "It is probably needless to inform you, Amos Winwood, that you are in the power of the Desert Vampires and need expect no mercy, as I see you have killed one of our men."

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE BURIED AZTEC CITY.

INTO the darkness of the passage that led from the lake crept the two boys, Harry and Barney. In their haste they had not thought of providing themselves with torches till they found themselves in the darkness of the passage. They spoke of it then, but decided they were as well off without them as they would be with them, for the light might betray them to their foes. Harry possessed a water-tight metallic case that was well filled with matches which might serve them a good turn.

As soon as possible they stood perfectly erect and went forward with their right hands against the damp, rocky side of the passage. Their progress was slow of a necessity, but they kept steadily on, only exchanging a low word now and then.

In this manner they went forward for a long time, then they came to the small hole that Barney had spoken of and were forced to get upon their hands and knees in order to pass through. Here Harry struck a match and examined the place.

"It is pretty safe to say that the parties occupying the Buried City now know nothing of this passage, or at least have not explored it," he observed, speaking cautiously. "This passage must have been made by the Aztecs years upon years ago. Of course one can only surmise what it was used for. It may have been made as an avenue of escape in case the city was overcome by a powerful foe, or it may have been simply used to bring water from the lake."

"Faith, b'y," said Barney, impatiently, "it's not stop t' speckylate."

The match went out and once more they crept forward, rising quite erect as soon as the passage would admit. Within a few minutes they came to the end of the passage, it seeming to debouch into a large cavern-like place.

Again Harry struck a match, whispering:

"We must mark this passage some way, Barney, so that we will know it again. There may be a dozen like it, but only this will lead us to the lake."

The Irish lad picked up a stone from the floor and, with considerable labor, scratched a large cross near the mouth of the passage, Harry being forced to burn several matches while he was doing so.

While Barney had been thus occupied Harry had been gazing around by the small light which the matches gave. He believed they had passed through the fertile mountain and reached the Buried City, and he fancied they were in an immense building of stone that had once been set fairly against the mountain's base, being so strongly built that even the torrent of matter which the volcano had hurled upon it had not crushed in the roof.

When Barney had completed the cross they stole onward again and Harry was not surprised when he felt a floor of solid stone beneath his feet. They soon came to a wall, and then they sorely felt the need of a light. Once more a match was made to serve, revealing a huge archway of stone and a passage beyond.

Along this second passage they made their way till, of a sudden, they both halted, with soft exclamations.

Far ahead they could see a light.

They watched it for several minutes and decided it was not approaching. Then they moved forward again with redoubled caution. The light remained stationary, and they soon discovered it was bursting like a lighted gas jet from the floor of the passage. They halted and remained on the watch for a long time.

"Begorra!" Barney finally whispered. "Oi don't say a saoul, d'you, Harry?"

"No, there doesn't seem to be any one in the vicinity. That is probably a lighted jet of natural gas and is kept burning constantly."

"Oi think Oi smell sulphur," asserted the Irish boy. "We must be gittin' noigh ter the ragions below an' the Auld B'y is pokin' av the foire. He is probably lookin' fer us, an' Oi think Oi hed better be turnin' bark."

As soon as they had satisfied themselves that there was no one near the light, they hurried forward and passed it, finding the passage made an abrupt turn beyond and was full of openings on either hand. Had they possessed a light it would have shown them many wonders which were hidden by the darkness.

It was not long before they found themselves in the midst of a mass of ruins and passages, the roofs of the buildings having been crushed

in at places by the weight upon them. Harry felt there was constant danger of some of the mass above their heads falling on them and crushing them out of existence, therefore he moved with as much caution as possible.

Soon they heard voices and caught the gleam of another light ahead. Before long they found themselves gazing out into a large temple-like place that was lighted by two monster jets of natural gas which made a constant hissing sound like that of escaping steam. Men were moving around in the gaslight, gathered in groups playing cards and telling stories, or sleeping on blankets spread on the hard stone floor. They were all a wild, brigandish-appearing set.

"They are the Desert Vultures," whispered Harry, with his lips close to Barney's ear.

"It's a haythen-lookin' gang they be," replied the little Irishman.

For a long time they remained concealed by the darkness and watched the outlaws. Finally, a man came running into the lighted space and cried out something that caused an instant stir. Swiftly the desperadoes adjusted some black masks over their faces, entirely concealing their features.

"What the Auld B'y is up now?" whispered Barney.

"Wait; we shall probably see."

Five minutes later several more masked men entered the lighted chamber, conducting two prisoners whose hands were confined behind them. As Harry Denton's eyes fell on one of the prisoners, he suddenly clasped both hands over his mouth to stifle the cry of amazement and dismay that leaped to his lips.

It was Wilma Winwood!

Beside the beautiful girl walked Amos Winwood, a look of despair on his bronzed face.

"Begorra!" gasped Barney. "It's the gurrul av the whoite canoe!"

As the bandits and their prisoners advanced into the chamber, the masked men present faced the chief and made a sort of military salute. This he returned with a wave of his hand, at the same time calling:

"Gila Frank."

One of the outlaws came swiftly forward.

"Here are more prisoners," said Black Vulture, waving his hand toward Winwood and the girl. "I put them into your charge to be guarded as closely as the others till the tribunal takes place. See that they are securely confined in the cells which I have caused to be prepared."

The man addressed as Gila Frank bowed, and at a motion from him, the prisoners were conducted away, vanishing into the darkness of a passage.

Harry Denton was fairly burning with a feverish excitement, but he held himself under restraint in a measure.

"By Heaven!" he whispered to Barney "that girl must be rescued in some way! Her fate will be a terrible one if she is not. Barney, we have desperate work before us."

"Roight, Harry, b'y, an' it's afeered Oi am thit we cannot do all thit we ought ter. Ye must not fergit thit Phillip may be in the harnds av this piratin' gang."

"I have not forgotten. I am quite sure he is, for did not the chief wretch of them all say something of other prisoners? I only wish Aztec Jack were here. He would be able to render us great assistance."

"Mayhap he is wan av the prisoners."

"Possibly, but I hope not. Hal Back, back! Those two men are coming this way!"

Seizing Barney's arm, Harry drew him further back into the shadows, and together they pressed into a ragged opening just large enough to admit them. Then they crouched in the darkness, each with a revolver in his hand.

Plainly they heard the sound of advancing feet, and knew the two outlaws were approaching. Fate seemed against them. If they were discovered and captured it would seem that their doom was certainly sealed, for there would be no one but Aztec Jack at liberty to attempt their rescue.

"If we are discovered, shoot to kill!" breathed Harry.

"Oi'll do thit same," was Barney's reply.

Nearer and nearer came the footfalls. The two outlaws entered the passage and approached. Directly opposite the place where the two boys were crouching they halted.

"Ther chief's scoopin' em in, eh, Sam?" said one.

"Bet yer boots!" was the reply. "He cal'lates ter meck er clean sweep. By Jinks! them gals is pretty, both on 'em! Reckon ther chief 'll take ther fu'st 'un fer his'n, an' ther Greaser 'll hev t'other. Ther two boys an' ther ole man 'll prob'ly git their woozles cut. But thar are still three more ter git holt on—two boys an' ther ole crazy critter. W'en we ketch 'em we'll hev er gen'el wipin' out."

"Yes—when you do!" thought Harry.

CHAPTER XXXII.

GOLDEN TREASURES OF THE BURIED CITY.

WHAT of Phil Strong—brave, noble Phil! Down into the darkness rode the Desert Vultures, their two captives in their midst, the clang of iron hoofs filling the black passage

with ten thousand echoes. In a few moments they halted, a light flashed before their eyes, the chief uttered a few sharp words, then the captives were removed from the horses and placed on their feet. Again the chief spoke, and the strange party started onward once more, a man in advance bearing a light. For a long time they continued to make a winding descent, but finally they entered the underground temple which was lighted by natural gas and occupied by the outlaws.

Phil had found an opportunity to whisper a word of encouragement in Anita's ear, for an instant their eyes met after reaching the buried temple, then they were torn apart. Armed men conducted the brave young man into the darkness of a narrow passage that was closely guarded at the mouth. In the darkness he heard a harsh, grating sound, and then a dim light gleamed out into the passage, revealing a heavy door that had just swung open. In another instant the captive was thrust through the doorway and the massive portal closed behind him.

"Por Dios! Senor Philip!"

He saw a figure before him, standing fairly in the dim light, and recognized the voice of Luis Servedo.

"Luis, little pard, is that you?" he cried.

"It is I," was the reply, and their hands met.

For a moment silence fell between them, and by the flickering light of a "slut candle"—a rag swimming in grease—they gazed into each other's faces. But suddenly Luis cried:

"Anita—my sister?"

"Is a captive, like ourselves."

A groan came from the lips of the Spanish youth, and at that moment he seemed utterly crushed.

"Bear up, pard," and Phil's hand fell upon the other's shoulder. "Don't break down. We will yet escape and snatch her from the clutches of these desert wolves."

"Oh, senor, you know not what you say!" was the sad response. "There is no way to escape. We are all doomed—doomed!"

"You give up too easily, Luis. I am resolved to find a way to escape."

"I have searched; there is none."

"Did you find nothing to give you encouragement?"

"Nothing. There is scarcely a loose stone in all the wall. Poor Anita!"

Seeing how badly crushed his companion was, Phil laid both hands on his shoulders and whirled him so that he could look full into his dark eyes.

"Listen, Luis Servedo," he said, speaking firmly; "I am not going to submit to die like a dog. I am going to get free in some way and save that sister of yours. Do you mean to let that contemptible and treacherous villain, Don Manuel Mendoza, triumph over you and possess what is rightfully yours? If you do, you have not the blood in your veins that I thought ran there."

"But what can we do? We are unarmed and prisoners here."

"Unarmed? Well, I guess *not*! Here is something the dogs did not find," and Phil produced a long-bladed knife from a place of concealment where it had quite escaped the search of his captors. "That may yet pave for us a red path to liberty. I shall not hesitate to use it if the time comes that one of these ruffians stands between myself and liberty."

Luis's eyes glowed a bit at sight of the blade, but he said not a word. Seeing this, Phil asked:

"Have they brought you food?"

"Once."

"How many were there who came with it to the cell?"

"Two."

"They will have to send more now. If we get desperate, we will make an attempt to overpower the men; but that is a last resort."

"It would only give us the pleasure of dying fighting," declared the young Spaniard, a faint smile coming to his lips for an instant.

"Well, there will be some satisfaction in that. But I am not ready to die yet. I have just got ready to live, and I wish to escape for that purpose. You want to escape to visit retribution on your villain of an uncle."

"Carajo! It is the truth that you speak."

"And I stand ready to help you, Luis. When we get out of this scrape we will screw down the brakes on the double-faced old imp of sin till he squeals like a pig."

"You do give me courage," cried the Spanish lad.

"I am glad of it, for your heart was down in your boots a few moments ago. Now to look around. This is a large room."

"Yes, they told me it is the death cell. When a prisoner is placed here he is to be tried for his life."

"I would like to know how long these desperadoes have been in possession of this underground city. They have been here long enough to get settled pretty well, but were not here when Aztec Jack visited the place the first time. I wonder if they have found any of the golden treasure of which Jack told!"

"It may be that the treasure never existed save in his imagination, senor."

"It is possible, but I am inclined to believe his imagination is not responsible for the story of a lost fortune. In all other things he plainly told the truth concerning this place. It must be that he told the truth about the treasure."

"Possibly; but there is little chance that any but the ladrones who hold possession here will ever profit by the treasure if it is here."

"Yet I am convinced they have not discovered a large amount of treasure. If they had, they would have no need of going on raiding expeditions."

This conclusion seemed logical, and for some time they talked of the lost treasure. Finally Phil asked Luis to show him the loose stone of which he had spoken.

"It is here, senor, in the wall," said the Spanish youth, indicating the place. "It is the only one I can find in all the room."

For several minutes Phil examined the stone, finding it could be moved slightly but could not be taken from its place. At length he thrust his knife into a crevice beside the stone. Instantly an astonishing thing took place.

A square of the stone floor beneath the young man's feet commenced to slowly and gently sink downward!

With a cry of amazement, Phil sprung from the sinking block, which continued to descend, revealing a dark opening. In an instant Luis caught up the dish containing the grease and burning rag and held it so the light penetrated the hole at their feet.

"Great Judas!" gasped Phil. "That knocks my reckoning!"

"It may be a way of escape, *quien sabe?*" came eagerly from the lips of the young Spaniard.

"You are right, and I hope it may prove such. If it does, we will give the rascals the slip and they will never understand how the game was worked. Hold the light lower. I believe the stone has ceased to descend."

They soon adjusted the poor light so it revealed the black depths and showed that the stone had truly stopped descending.

"It has reached the bottom!" exclaimed Phil.

"Si, senor. There is a stone floor down there I believe. It was probably underground before this city was destroyed by the volcano."

"And perhaps it was built as a secret way of escape if the place was overcome by a powerful enemy."

"True, true!"

"In that case it will probably lead us to the outer world. But when we go Anita must be with us."

"She must. If she were here now, it is possible we could all go forth to liberty."

"I am going down there and explore that place. What a piece of fortune it was when these outlaws chose this chamber as a place to confine us—providing this is a way of escaping!"

Phil drew the knife from the crevice and immediately the square block of stone began to ascend slowly and silently. The lapse of time had not injured the wonderful mechanism by which its movements were controlled. In a few seconds it regained its place and the floor of the chamber seemed unbroken.

Luis was trembling with excitement, but Phil was calm and deliberate in all his moves, although something seemed to whisper within his heart that he stood on the verge of a wonderful discovery. Deliberately he stepped on the square of stone and thrust the blade of the knife into the crevice in the wall.

Again the stone began to descend.

"If this is a death-trap, good-by!" he half-laughed.

Down from sight sunk the stone, carrying the cool youth with it into the depths. Luis bent over the opening and gazed down. He saw Phil reach the floor below and step from the stone. Then he stopped and looked up, saying:

"By George! I want a light. It is dark as Erebus down here. Hold on: I have a case of matches and am all right. If you hear any one coming, come to the opening and call me. I will not be far away, for I dare not go far without a better light than a few matches."

"Five, ten minutes passed, every minute seeming an hour to the excited young Spaniard who crouched before the dark opening, the 'slut candle' in his hand. Once or twice he started wildly and listened with his hand pressed to his heart, believing he heard the sound of approaching steps. But he quickly discovered that his imagination was responsible for the sounds he believed he heard.

"Pull out the knife, pard!"

It was Phil's voice, and Luis hastened to obey. Slowly the stone rose with its human freight and soon Phil stepped out upon the floor of the chamber. In his hands he held some strangely moulded copper-colored and dust-covered metal dishes.

"Look!" he cried, holding them out—"look at those!"

"What are they?"

"What are they? Listen to that!" dropping one on the floor. The metal gave out a sonorous

ringing that could not be mistaken by trained ears.

"It is gold!" cried Luis.

"Yes, it is gold—they are all gold! There are huge chests filled with it below and the dishes and ornaments are strewn everywhere on the floor. I should not have noticed them had not one rung beneath my feet. There is enough down there to make a hundred men millionaires! We have discovered the treasure vault of the old Aztec city."

"But we have not discovered a way of escape. *Madre de Dios!* we are doomed!"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A ROAD TO LIBERTY—TO DIE IN ONE HOUR!

"Now don't go to giving up in that way!" cried Phil, although he knew the chances were against finding another opening to the underground treasure-vault of the Buried City. "I have come back for the light that I may fully explore the regions below. It is best that we know at once if we can escape that way. There was probably some way to work this wonderful trap from below, but it is doubtful if we can discover the method. It was by the rarest good fortune that I hit upon the secret spring concealed somewhere in this rocky wall. It is not probable that any of the villains will visit this chamber within an hour, and by the end of that time I mean to know if we can escape from the treasure-vault. We must have a good start when we go from here—if we ever do—for we shall have to leave this trap open behind us to tell our foes how we escaped. Come, now, Luis, cheer up!"

Phil's words had some effect on the disheartened Spanish youth, for Luis's face cleared a little, and he said:

"It is true that there may be another entrance to the vault, but you must know, senor, the chances are against it. The fewer the entrances the smaller the chance of the vault being discovered by those who knew nothing of it."

"That is true enough, but I am not going to give up till I know there is no chance to escape from the vault. I am going to explore the place at once if you will let me have the light."

Luis promptly passed him the light and, stepping on the movable stone, Phil again descended into the old treasure-vault. Once more the young Spaniard crouched beside the opening, gazing down into the depths. He saw Phil move away and gradually the light faded, leaving the watcher gazing into the black darkness.

It was fully an hour before Phil returned, and when he asked Luis to pull out the knife there was a joyous ring in his voice that filled the Spanish youth with hope.

"What have you discovered?" Luis eagerly asked, the moment his friend stood in the chamber once more.

"I have discovered a road to liberty!" was the prompt reply. "We can escape into the ruins of the old city, after which we ought to be able to escape some way."

They sat down on the stone floor and discussed the situation for a long time, forming a hundred plans and finally abandoning them all. The time slipped swiftly away till finally they were startled by the heavy tramp of feet in the passage beyond the door.

"Some one is coming!" exclaimed Phil.

They started to their feet just as the door swung open and a man was thrust into the chamber. Then the heavy door closed on the third prisoner, who stood gazing in surprise at the two boys.

It was Amos Winwood.

"Hello!" cried Phil, instantly recognizing the man as the one Mohave Mat had called Black Vulture. "What do you want here?"

"I want liberty," was the reply.

"Well, you have come to a mighty poor place. We haven't any to spare."

"Then, like myself, you are captives in the power of this infernal band? May Heaven's blight rest on them all!"

Phil regarded the man suspiciously, more than half-believing he was connected with the outlaws and had been placed in the cell for some evil purpose. Winwood seemed consumed with fury, for he began pacing up and down the chamber, fuming and raving very much like an insane person.

"After all these years that villain has triumphed over me!" he groaned, clinching his hands and lifting them above his head with a gesture of despair. "Oh, Wilma, Wilma! what will your fate be! Can it be that the God of Heaven will allow such wretches to triumph?"

Phil made a signal for Luis to remain silent, and the boys watched the excited man for a long time. Phil was not sure but Winwood was doing some very creditable acting, for the purpose of deceiving them, and the more he saw of the man the firmer became the conviction. He found an opportunity to whisper a few words to Luis while the excited man was pacing the floor.

"Keep cool," he said. "I think he is a spy on us. We must wait till he settles down, then overpower and bind him. They have put him in here to make sure we find no way to escape."

Perhaps such a belief was natural under the

circumstances, but Phil Strong never made a bigger mistake in his life.

The two boys lay down on the floor and pretended to sleep, but Winwood continued to pace the chamber and talk aloud. He muttered of a terrible wrong done some one in the past—of a dead man returned to life—of a meeting and a murder. Slowly the hours crept away, but still the man walked on and on, muttering, raving, cursing and praying, till at last Phil began to believe he was indeed mad, and was not shamming.

But while the two boys lay on the floor, waiting for Winwood to become calmer, they fell asleep, both being in great need of rest.

How long they slept they could not tell, but they were rudely aroused, and started up to find a number of dark-robed and hooded figures in the chamber.

"Arise!" commanded one of the somber figures.

They sprang to their feet and were instantly seized, and their hands were bound behind them. In the midst of the dark-robed figures they saw Amos Winwood, with his hands confined like their own, and they realized the man was not a friend of the outlaws. For an instant the eyes of the two boys met, and on the faces of both was painted the same thought:

"What fools we have been!"

It now seemed that their chance of escaping was forever cut off, for they believed they were to be led forth to execution.

"Forward!"

A stern voice gave the command, and the prisoners were conducted from the chamber. Along the passage they went till the brilliantly-lighted temple of the Buried City was reached. There a strange scene greeted their gaze.

The outlaws were drawn up in two lines, facing each other, being separated by about twenty feet, every man wearing a mask. At the further end of the line, upon a sort of throne cut from solid stone, sat a figure clad in the same somber-colored kind of a cloak and hood, that concealed the forms and faces of the guards escorting the prisoners. At his right hand stood a man attired in a very showy Mexican suit, wearing a *serape* over his shoulders, and a crimson mask over his face. A little to the left of the figure on the stone throne stood the two girls, Wilma and Anita, with their arms around each other. At sight of their friends they would have rushed forward, but the black-robed guards waved them back with long, glittering lances. In front of the dark figure on the stone throne the guard halted with their prisoners, bowing low and saluting.

"The accursed ones are before you, noble judge," said one of the guard.

"What is the charge against them?" came from beneath the black hood.

At sound of the voice, which had a slight accent that told the speaker was not an American, Luis Servado started slightly as if he would speak, but Phil quickly whispered:

"Easy, pard! It's old Mendoza, but keep cool!"

"They are charged with invading our sacred land," said a solemn voice, in response to the judge.

"Who is their accuser?"

"I am!" and the masked figure at the right of the throne stepped forward promptly.

"And you are—?"

"Chief of this brotherhood."

"Is this the only charge against them?"

"It is not, most noble judge. That man there"—indicating Amos Winwood—"is charged with the death of one of our brothers."

"I killed the dog in self-defense!" cried Winwood, hotly; "and I would do the same again under similar circumstances. I only wish I had the chance to serve your whole dastardly band in the same manner. I would surely wipe them from the face of God's green earth!"

"That is enough," slowly said the judge, waving his hand. "Your sentence is death! You will be executed in one hour!"

Winwood would have spoken again, but the guards silenced him for the time, while the judge of the mock tribunal asked for any further charge against the other prisoners.

"That one," and the man in Mexican attire indicated Phil Strong, "made a desperate attempt to slay some of our brothers."

"Like the man you have just condemned—in self-defense!" cried Phil, unable to keep quiet longer. "Your cowardly gang fell upon me in a most treacherous manner, and I did my best to defend myself and the maiden who was with me. If you had not played such a miserable trick on me, I would have sent some of your gang to their master below!"

"Your words condemn you," said the judge.

"In an hour you die!"

"Murderer! Wretch!" shouted Luis Servado, in Spanish. "I know you, even though your face is concealed! You are my uncle, Don Manuel Mendoza, but I do not believe my mother's blood flows in your accursed veins!"

For a moment the black-robed judge hesitated, then he arose to his feet, removing the hood and revealing the evil face of the Spanish Don, as he hissed:

"Caramba! You die with the rest, Luis

Servado! You are partly right, for I am only half-brother to your mother. Your father died at my command, but your mother was killed by an accident. I have plotted for your father's estate; now it shall be mine. You will be dead and your body forever hidden in this lost city. Your sister will become the wife of Black Vulture, the chief of the Desert Vampires. The other beautiful one is to be mine. Ha! ha! It is all fixed very well."

Luis was fairly furious and would have sprung toward the dastardly Don, bound as he was, had not two of the black-robed guards prevented. Wilma burst into tears, but Anita stood regarding Don Mendoza with eyes in which glowed a fire of scorn, contempt and hatred most intense.

Amos Winwood began to rave like a madman. "Remember there is a just God above!" he cried, with an intensity that startled the outlaws. "When you dream not of it he will send his vengeance upon you! Even now the hour of your doom may be at hand! You who have acknowledged yourself chief of this murderous band I know as Russel Craig! You are the two-faced friend of long years ago! You dare not show your cowardly face!"

"You are mistaken, Amos," said the chief, coolly, removing the mask and revealing the dark features of the self-styled Mustangar. You are doomed to die, and I had as lief you would see my face as not. You deserve death for to-night you murdered Norton Downing, whom you assisted me in skinning at cards several years ago. You defeated me in securing Downing's wife, and when she died you ran away with the child. You have brought her up to fall into my hands at last. But I have a greater prize in the little black-eyed beauty there. My triumph is complete."

"The trial is ended," announced Mendoza. "The doomed prisoners will be given their last hour of life with the señoritas in the death chamber. *Guardos*, away with them!"

He waved his hand commandingly, and the black-robed guards led the captives away to await their doom.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A DESPERATE DASH FOR LIFE.

THE delight of Phil Strong and Luis Servado may be imagined when they discovered the outlaws intended confining the entire party for an hour in the chamber from which they had been lately removed. For a moment their eyes met gleaming with a new hope, then they were conducted into the darkness of the passage.

The heavy door of the death chamber closed upon the five captives. Then ensued a scene which it is impossible to describe. Wilma fell almost fainting into Amos Winwood's arms, while Luis and his sister embraced. But, meantime, Phil Strong capered and danced round the chamber like one gone wild with joy instead of a person doomed to die in one hour.

"We'll slip 'em yet!" he cried, in guarded tones. "This is the very best thing that could have happened! *Whoopie!*"

The girls and Winwood were filled with wonder at his singular actions, but Luis said:

"There is not a moment to be lost, Señor Philip. We must get away at once."

"You are right," agreed Phil, as he warmly grasped Anita's hand. "We will bid this place good-by within the next five minutes."

"What do you mean?" asked Winwood, in amazement.

"Wait, old man, and I will explain. Great Judas! we must hurry or we will be left in the darkness! The grease is about consumed in that dish. Listen," and he swiftly told of the discovery he had made of the secret entrance to the treasure vault and of the passage out of it into the ruins of the Buried City.

"Can this be true?" cried Amos, with new hope.

"I will soon show you it is," laughed Phil. "You had better go down first, Luis, then I will send down the others and will follow last myself. Once in the vault below, we will fight till the last gasp before we will be taken again. All ready!"

The young Spaniard stepped on the block and Phil thrust the knife into the wall, causing the stone to slowly descend. When Luis had reached the bottom he stepped off and Phil pulled out the knife. Wilma followed Luis into the depths, and Anita found an opportunity to whisper some words into Phil's ear that made the young man's heart throb wildly, then she stepped on the block and went down.

Just as the movable stone ascended for Amos Winwood, heavy footsteps were heard at the door, and Phil gasped:

"Some one is coming!"

The steps stopped at the door!

"Here, take the light!" the youth hoarsely whispered, thrusting the "slut candle" into Winwood's hand. "Onto that stone, man! Spring off the instant it gets low enough for you to do so!"

The next instant the man was standing on the sinking stone.

Like a lion at bay, Phil stood there in the darkness listening to the sounds at the door. How slowly the moving stone crept downward with its human freight! Would it never reach

the bottom? In another instant the outlaws would be in the chamber.

The heavy door swung open just as Phil Strong dropped through the opening into the vault below. He struck by Winwood's side, and heard a cry of amazement in the death-chamber above. Suppressing a desire to answer with a shout of defiance, Phil snatched the light from Winwood's hand and said sharply:

"Follow me close!"

Like so many black shadows, they flitted through the old treasure-vault of the Buried City, led by Phil, who held the dim, flaring light above his head. Here and there among the chests of gold and silver treasure they dodged. Once Phil stumbled and fell, but he clung to the light so that it did not fall them. When he arose he had a long, heavy rod in his hand, with which he intended to defend himself if a hand-to-hand battle should occur. Luis and Winwood also seized in each hand some of the heavy metal bars or dishes, feeling that they might need them in case they were hard pressed.

"This way!" called the youth with the light. "There is a place close by where the vault has caved in, and we shall have to get out by climbing up over the debris and out through a small hole. Hark!"

Behind them they heard a chorus of wild cries, which seemed to indicate that the outlaws had entered the vault. Looking back, they saw a moving light that revealed several dark figures.

"They are coming!" gritted Phil through his set teeth. "Our light will guide them, but we must have it to discover the way out. On, on!"

They soon came to a place where a mass of earth and stone reached to the very roof of the vault.

"This is the spot!" Phil cried. "Up, up! Follow me!"

They clambered upward over the huge stones, cutting their hands and tearing their clothes, hearing the triumphant yells of the ruffians who were approaching. It seemed that they must surely be taken before they could get out of the vault. Phil found the opening, and Wilma crept through in advance, Anita following. The outlaws were at the foot of the mass as Amos Winwood crept through the narrow aperture. Turning on his back, Luis hurled one of the heavy pieces of metal which he had secured at the foremost ruffian. It was an excellent shot, striking the man on the shoulder and knocking him down instantly.

"Through the opening, little pard!" shouted Phil, and Luis hastened to obey. When Phil found an opportunity to follow, the pursuers were half-way up the rock pile, and, as he struggled out, he felt a hand touch for an instant one of his boots and knew the desperadoes were close at his heels.

The moment the brave young man rose to a standing position he passed the light to Luis, saying:

"Hold it here!"

Then, with a determined, deadly gleam in his blue eyes, he lifted the heavy rod above his head. A moment later the head and shoulders of a pursuer appeared as the man struggled through the opening which he was destined never to leave alive. Phil waited till the desperado was half-way through, then the heavy rod descended with terrible force, striking the doomed wretch on the back of the head. Without so much as a groan, the man sunk down motionless.

"Come on!" cried Phil, a shudder of horror running over him at sight of the terrible work he had been forced to do. He again seized the light and led the way, knowing the death of their comrade would stop the pursuers for a short time at least.

Onward through the winding passages of the Buried City fled the fugitives, their one desire being to get away from the outlaws, for they realized they did not know the way out of the place and might be going in the wrong direction. Suddenly they came in sight of a light far ahead and halted in dismay, seeing two figures flit out of sight.

"*Santissima!*" gasped Luis. "Our foes are ahead."

"And behind, too," said Phil, as a chorus of cries came out of the darkness behind them. "We must go forward. There can be no turning back."

Onward they went till they came in full view of a burning gas-jet that sprang from the floor of the passage. Again they saw two dark figures flitting into the darkness beyond the light.

"There are only two," said Winwood. "If there are no more in our path, we will give those two the toughest battle they ever indulged in. We are fighting for more than our lives."

"If we only knew the way out!" came from Phil's lips. "We might escape now if we did; but soon the outlaws will put on double guard, and if we succeed in dodging them amid the ruins, we shall be fast in a trap."

"We must trust in God!" Winwood solemnly said.

Past the light they hurried, and it seemed that an unseen hand was guiding them, for they turned straight toward the secret passage which Barney Brady had discovered.

Suddenly two dark figures appeared before them.

"At them!" shouted Phil.

"Hold!" cried a clear, familiar voice. "We are friends!"

"Begorra! thit's a Gospil fact now!" declared a second voice with a rich, Irish brogue.

Harry Denton and Barney Brady stood before them!

"Oh, it be us!" declared the Irish lad, as Phil and Luis stared at them in wondering amazement. "We are roight heur forninst the eyes av ye."

"But how in the name of the wonderful did you come here?" demanded Phil.

"The legs av us brought us. It's tickled t' dith we are t' say ye all, an' if yees warnt t' git out, all ye nade do is folly our lade."

"Then hurry on, for heaven's sake!" urged Winwood. "We are pursued by the demons who hold possession of this place. Hark! they are close at hand!"

In truth, the sounds made by the approaching outlaws could be plainly heard, and once more the fugitives dashed onward, now led by Barney Brady, while Harry assisted Wilma along and Winwood fell back with Phil to beat back the desperadoes if they were overtaken by the wretches.

When the secret passage was reached the desert brigands were so near that the heavy tramp of their booted feet could be plainly heard. Harry's heart was full of dread, for he believed a battle must surely take place where the passage became so narrow. If they could get beyond that place he felt they would stand a good show of reaching the open air.

The sound of pursuit came nearer and nearer as they rushed along the passage. It began to appear that they would be overtaken before they could reach the place where it became so narrow. But no—they suddenly came to it, and Harry directed the girls to creep through as quickly as possible, a thing they lost no time in doing. Barney followed, then Harry and Winwood, and just as the pursuing outlaws came in sight, Phil crept into the narrow opening.

Fortune continued to favor the fugitives, for they all passed through the narrow opening and reached the passage beyond, then they started forward again, knowing the foremost of their pursuers was creeping through the contraction behind them.

But, suddenly, a strange thing occurred. The ground beneath their feet seemed to give a slight shudder; then, from the very bosom of the earth, as it appeared, came a deep, terrible groaning. The next instant everything around them seemed to reel like the deck of a storm-tossed ship, they were hurled to the earth and almost smothered by a heavy cloud of dust, while the light went out, leaving them in darkness dense and terrible!

CHAPTER XXXV.

FLYING FROM A TERRIBLE DOOM.

STUNNED, confused and nearly smothered with dust, our friends struggled to their feet as soon as the ground ceased to tremble and began calling to each other in the darkness. Their voices rung with hollow echoes through the underground passage, sounding like the frantic cries of lost souls in the regions of eternal darkness.

For some time the cries of the party were so confusing that it was impossible to tell if they were all unharmed, but at length Phil Strong made his voice heard above the others.

"Keep still!" he shouted. "Let's discover if any one is injured."

His words had the desired effect, for the others ceased their cries, although the flying dust continued to make them cough and sneeze violently.

"Luis Servedo," called Phil.

"Here, senior, unharmed."

"And your sister?"

"I am here," responded Anita's voice in the darkness close at hand.

"What of the other young lady?" asked Phil, as he groped his way forward and found the Spanish maiden in the darkness.

"She is safe," declared Harry Denton.

"And the stranger?"

"Alive, thank God!" responded the voice of Amos Winwood.

"Barney Brady?"

"Did, begobs!—did as auld Adam! Achew! achew! Ye nadn't stop t' burry me, fer—achew!—Oi'm burried already!"

"What has happened?" asked Harry. "What caused the ground to shake so beneath our feet, and what hurled us to the ground?"

"It must have been an earthquake," replied Winwood.

"I believe the narrow passage we just crept through has caved in behind us and cut off or destroyed our pursuers," declared Phil. "That was what caused this cloud of dust."

"Begorra! Oi reckon ye are roight, fer a parrut av the roof fell onther the hid av me."

"We had better get out of here as quickly as possible," said Winwood. "Another stock may bury us all."

Feeling this was true, they at once started onward toward the mouth of the passage, not even pausing to light the "slut-candle." For some reason Phil, Luis and Winwood still clung to the heavy pieces of metal which they had picked up in the treasure vault of the Buried City.

It was not long before they found themselves at the opening with the canoe rocking before them. Into this the girls were hastily placed, and Winwood and Harry also entered, the latter hastily seizing the paddle and sending the light craft out from beneath the cliff, promising to return at once and bring out the others.

The moment the canoe shot out from beneath the cliff, cries of amazement and horror came from the lips of its occupants, for they all saw a singular and appalling sight.

A mass of black smoke was rising from the volcano that had remained dormant so many years!

"My God!" cried Amos Winwood. "Another eruption is about to occur! That earthquake shock was but a forerunner. That volcano may begin to spout fire and lava at any instant! We are lost!"

For a single moment Harry Denton was paralyzed with dread. Then he cried, as he sent the canoe shooting swiftly to shore:

"We are not dead yet! There may be a chance to escape. Oh, if we only had our horses!"

"I have a dozen confined in a valley close at hand," asserted Amos. "I captured and tamed them all."

"Then get them here as soon as you can. I will return for the boys while you are after them. Our lives depend on your movements!"

"I will not fail you!" shouted the man as he leaped ashore and dashed away.

Hurriedly Harry assisted the trembling maidens ashore, bidding them remain where they were till he returned with the rest of the party. Then he sent the canoe shooting back, to disappear beneath the cliff. A few seconds later it emerged with the four boys, and soon all were ashore.

Meantime the old volcano had been uttering hollow, rumbling groans that filled the girls with terror. Once or twice they seemed to feel the ground shiver slightly beneath their feet. There was no doubt but an eruption was pending.

"Worra, worra!" groaned Barney Brady. "Oi wish thit felly w'u'd sthoph shmokin' av his poipe till Oi git away fram these parruts. Hear him growl, the auld spalapeen! Begorra! Oi belave he is sweerin' at me!"

Every minute seemed an hour to the little party gathered on the shore of the lake, with their eyes fastened on the destroying monster of the Mystic Land. It seemed that Winwood would never return, but Wilma assured them he would not think of deserting them.

Denser and blacker became the mass of smoke that poured from the opening in the top of the volcano as it pours from the tall chimney of some great iron works. More and more ominous became the grumbling growls of the awakening monster.

Suddenly there was a beating of many hoofs, and Amos Winwood dashed up with half a dozen horses, or tame mustangs, close behind him.

"Mount, mount!" he fairly shrieked. "We have not a moment to spare! The animals will follow me, so you will not need bridles. There is no time to think of anything but flight!"

The girls were quickly assisted upon the bare backs of the mustangs, and fortunately they were both fine horsewomen who did not need saddles. Anita did not hesitate to mount "man fashion," but Wilma sat her horse as if it wore a side-saddle. Nearly all—if not quite all—of the Spanish and Mexican girls of the Southwest ride astride.

With a peculiar shout Winwood dashed away, and the mustangs followed him, bearing the party from the terrible danger of the Mystic Land to the dreadful danger and suffering of the desert—heat, hunger and thirst!

Behind them the old mountain sent out a louder roar, as if angered by their attempt to escape. Every now and then Winwood would utter that peculiar cry so well known by the following mustangs.

In a short time the border of the desert was reached, but they did not halt for an instant. Out upon the sandy waste galloped the animals, seeming to feel some of the terror that filled the bosoms of their riders.

It was yet early in the forenoon, a night having passed while our friends were in the Buried City.

Looking back they beheld a great cloud of smoke hanging around the tops of the two mountains and settling like a black pall over the Mystic Land.

"The eruption must come soon," cried Harry.

"If it will hold off a short time longer we shall probably get beyond its reach," said Winwood. "It can not be very extensive."

On, on they thundered. Behind them came a man on a snow-white horse that was gaining at every jump. Ten minutes later he had almost reached the party. Harry Denton looked back and saw him, and a cry of joy came from the youth's lips.

It was Aztec Jack!

The Desert Nomad was not dead, by any means; but at first Amos Winwood believed he was pursued by a ghost.

Like the wind the white steed carried its rider past the fugitives, Jack wildly shouting:

"On—spur on! There is death behind us!"

But the little mustangs which bore the party were doing their utmost, making it useless to try to urge them to a faster pace. The animals were no match for Jack's noble white horse, although Winwood, who was also mounted on a white horse, might have followed him closely had he wished.

Aztec Jack looked back and again urged them on with his wild shouts. Harry could see that the man was fearfully excited, and he feared he would fall from his horse in one of those singular fits.

"Begorra!" exclaimed Barney; "he'll be after spltin' the throax av him if he isn't a bit carreful. Stoph yer yellin', nion! It's me horrus thit is nighly scarrud inther a fit now."

"The man is crazy as a mad wolf!" averred Phil. "Hear him shout!"

"Look back! look back!" yelled Jack.

Involuntarily they obeyed. In the midst of the black smoke that hung around the mountain top they saw a red spout of flame shooting upward. A moment later there came a terrible roar and the whole top of the mountain seemed to topple over and fall into the valley with a thunderous crash that shook the earth violently!

The old Aztec city was buried forever from mortal eyes!

Over the plain swept huge volumes of smoke, ashes and dirt, covering the face of the heavens with a terrible pall and shutting out the morning sunlight. Still the smoke rolled up from the heart of the land of ruin and desolation, the ground trembled and the sullen roaring continued. An almost midnight darkness enveloped the fugitives on the barren desert.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

FROM DARKNESS INTO LIGHT.

It is needless to attempt to picture the suffering of the little party in crossing the desert after barely escaping destruction by the volcano. They were covered by dirt and blinded by the smoke and ashes which for a time cast a somber pall over the great plain for miles around the spot where the eruption took place. When the smoke slowly drifted away the sun beat down pitilessly and the dust rose in choking masses from beneath the feet of their animals. They had neither food nor water, and the suffering of the poor animals and their riders was truly terrible. Only those who have felt the pangs of thirst can fully understand the horror of their position.

Some distance in advance of the others rode Aztec Jack with his head bowed till the chin concealed by the white beard was pressed against his breast, his position being one of the utmost despondency. Every now and then he would lift his eyes to glare wildly around and mutter incoherently, then he would again fall into the attitude of utter abandon. He did not seem to notice Amos Winwood at all, but the latter watched him closely, seeming somewhat puzzled.

All the boys tried to be as cheerful as possible, and more than once Barney Brady forced a laugh by some witty sally. But the girls suffered the most, although both of them bore up bravely. They felt that their escape from the outlaws and from destruction by the volcano was little short of marvelous, and they could not believe the kind Providence that had seemed to shield them thus far would permit them to perish in the desert.

They were forced to make several halts to allow their animals to rest, and once for the exhausted girls to sleep a while during the dark ness preceding the rising of the moon, but they pushed southward as swiftly as possible. At dawn of another day they found the mountains looming in the sky several miles ahead, and the sight filled them with new life.

What a mad scene there was when water was reached at last! What keen enjoyment the clear liquid gave both human and beast!

A spot near the spring was chosen as a camping place, and Harry and Barney, who still possessed their rifles, started out to attempt to bring in some kind of game that would serve as food. In this they were fortunate, for within an hour they killed a prong-horn antelope and brought it to the camp. Winwood had started a fire, and it was not long before the flesh of the antelope was being cooked.

A feast followed that seemed to restore every one to their usual spirits save Aztec Jack. The old Treasure-Seeker remained gloomy and dejected in appearance. At length Winwood arose and approached the strange man, stopping directly in front of him and saying:

"Can it be that you are Norton Downing?"

"Yes," was the reply, as the speaker got upon his feet and fastened his sunken eyes on Winwood's face, "I am Norton Downing."

"I believe you, at last, but how it is that you are not dead and buried is still a puzzle to me. In the long ago we were friends, and I hope you will believe me when I tell you I have never ceased to be a friend to you."

"If you can explain some things, I may believe you my friend even now."

"What are they?"

"First, why did you, in league with Russel Craig, lure me into a gambling dive, entice me into a game of cards, and finally drug, rob and cast me into a mad-house?"

"Stop!" cried Winwood. "As there is a Just One above, I am innocent of the last three things named. I did go with you and Craig into a place to have a little social game, as Craig called it, but if you were drugged, I had no hand in it. You won nearly all of my money and Craig was nearly cleaned out when the wine you had drank seemed to overcome you and you fell asleep. He said he would get you home and called a carriage. After aiding him in getting you into the carriage, I bade him good-night and went my way. The next day I heard from Craig's own lips how before the carriage reached your home you seemed to revive and sprung out and dashed away in the darkness like a madman. He said he pursued, but failed to overtake you. The story sounded strange and almost improbable, but I did not think of doubting it then. The detectives and police were put on the hunt."

"You know Dora and I were on quite friendly terms before you married her—a friendship which was not wholly destroyed when I lost her, although I never entertained one base or treacherous thought toward you. I went to your home and found Craig had been there and told her some things, keeping a certain amount from her. She was nearly distracted, but believed you would soon return. Three weeks later a body was taken from the river many miles below the city, dressed in your clothing. The face and hands had been fearfully eaten by fish, so that no familiar feature could be recognized; but for all that, no one doubted that your body had been recovered."

"After this Craig paid such attention to your wife that she was fairly driven desperate and asked my protection. She did not recover from the shock of your supposed death, but slowly pined away, growing thinner and sadder day by day, fairly dying of a broken heart."

A groan of anguish was wrung from the lips of the listening man, and, seeing how deeply the narration was affecting him, Winwood passed over it swiftly.

"Dora died, leaving her child in my charge; but Craig swore he would have the girl and tried to get her away from me. He took to drink and became a perfect desperado. Fearing for the little one's fate if she fell into his clutches, I quietly left that part of the country. But, Craig seemed determined to possess the little girl, for he followed me from place to place, although I sometimes gave him the slip for years. But, as the girl grew older he apparently grew more persistent. Once he told me she would become the perfect image of her mother, and as he had lost Dora he would have little Dot."

"Finally I fled to New Mexico and changed Dot's name to Wilma, thinking that might baffle the wretch, in a measure. For years I lived in Santa Fe under an assumed name. But, Craig again got after us and I fled into Arizona. Here I have changed from place to place, always dreading to see the hated wretch appear. He found me at last in the fertile section near the volcano."

"Not once did I doubt your death, Norton Downing, till the night I saw you beside the fire here on the border of this desert. Even then I could not believe it was you. When you found me by the mountains I began to believe it might be you, although I still had my doubts. But, when you fell on your knife I thought your life had surely ended."

"I fell in a fit. The knife lay flat on the ground and did not even cut my clothes."

"Well, you have heard my story. As there is a heaven above us, it is the truth!"

"Amos Winwood," said the pale-faced man, speaking slowly, as he grasped the other's hand, "I believe you. The scales have fallen from my eyes and I see the true light at last. It was Russel Craig who threw me into the private mad-house, of which there are far too many in our land. While there my brain became affected and at times it is not all right now. I escaped to find my wife dead and to hear things which made me believe you the one who had done me such a wrong. I swore to hunt you down, but now I must turn my steps on the trail of Russel Craig."

"Your trail is ended. The wretch has felt the vengeance of God. He was the outlaw known as Black Vulture, and, with all of his followers, he must have been destroyed by the eruption of the volcano."

Turning his eyes toward Heaven, the old Treasure Seeker said solemnly:

"Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord."

"Now," said Winwood, grasping the old man's arm and turning him about till he faced the two girls, who had heard every word, "there is your child! She has her mother's face, and her heart is pure as the angels'. Wilma, this is your own true father."

With a cry that seemed to come from the uttermost depths of his soul, Norton Downing stretched out his hands to his child. She answered the cry as she came forward, and father and daughter were reunited.

Food was procured from some friendly Moquis Indians, the mountains and Painted Desert were passed and the hacienda was reached in safety. There Luis found things in general disorder, and it was a long time before he could get everything straightened out; but Don Mendoza and his satellites were gone, never to return, and the discharged herders were soon restored to their old positions.

For many days the entire party were guests at the hacienda, and very merry days they were. Barney improved the time in a desperate attempt to teach the little peon girl to speak English, and Harry and Phil were with Wilma and Anita very much. Aztec Jack, properly Norton Downing, seemed a changed man, and he was often seen walking and talking with Amos Winwood.

Luis proposed a fandango, to which the others agreed, and from two hundred miles around the people came to attend the festivity. Of course it was a "success," every one present declaring it the finest "time" in which they ever took part. It was the duty of the rising sun to silence the music and stop the dance.

The time came when our friends were to part. Then it was learned that both Phil and Barney would remain at the hacienda, the former as chief herder, and the latter as an employee upon the place. Although the metal rod which Phil picked up in the treasure-vault of the Buried City, and to which he clung through everything that followed, proved to be solid gold, he declared he had had quite enough of treasure-seeking and was willing to settle down to a more quiet life.

Norton Downing, Amos Winwood, Harry Denton and Wilma were escorted all the way to Prescott by a party from the hacienda. There Phil, Barney and Luis regretfully bade adieu to their friends.

In after years Phil Strong married Anita Servedo and became Luis Servedo's partner in the cattle business. Barney made the peon girl his legal partner for life as soon as she could talk English, which she finally did with a perfectly delightful brogue!

Norton Downing consented to his daughter's marriage with Harry Denton, and lives with them to-day, a hale and happy old man, untroubled by any of the terrible fits which threatened to end his life, at one time. Amos Winwood, "Uncle Amos," is a welcome visitor at Harry Denton's home.

The "Mystic Land" of Arizona is to-day a barren, desolate waste, and no human hand will ever bring the lost treasure of the Buried City to the light of day.

THE END.

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